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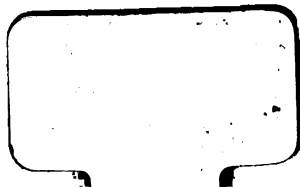
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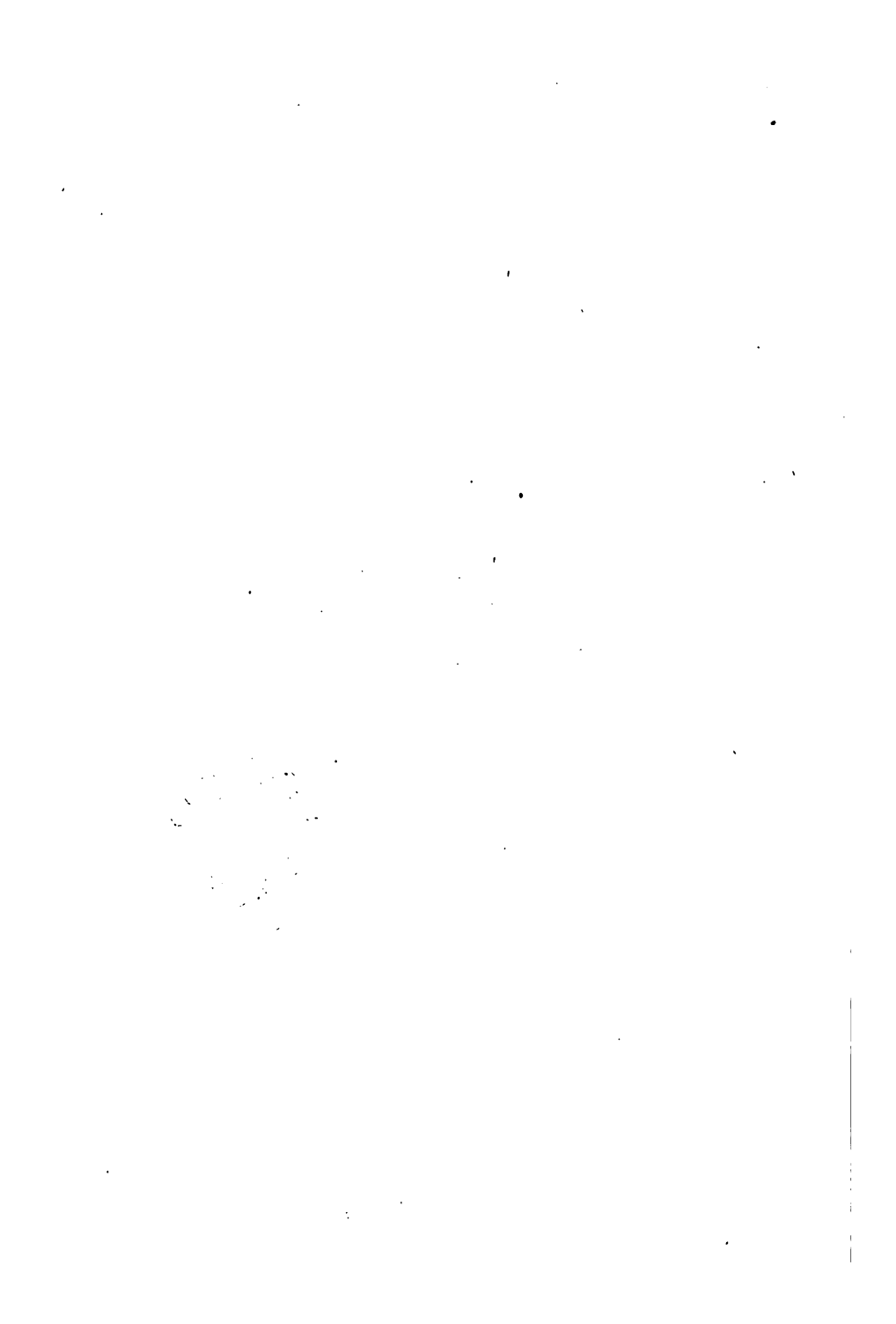
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**IS HE THE MAN?**



# IS HE THE MAN?

A Nobel.

BY

W. CLARK RUSSELL,

AUTHOR OF

"JOHN HOLDSWORTH: CHIEF MATE," "JILTED," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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## IS HE THE MAN?

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### THE HOUSEKEEPER'S STORY.

*(Continued.)*

#### IX.

**W**HEN in the silence of my room I reflected on the part I had played I was amazed at it; and wondered what sort of reception the story would get were I to make a boast of it.

I felt afraid to meet Mr. Ransome again. The dread was owing to my belief that my influence over him had been but a temporary power of which the particular mood of his mind at that time had rendered him susceptible; that a greater or lesser degree of madness would break the spell, awaken him to a perception of the humiliation he had suffered at my hands, and impel him to

deal with me with probably a good deal more fury than he had ever exhibited towards his wife.

These conclusions, which were perfectly reasonable, were also, as you may perceive, rather terrifying. My courage had been taxed to the utmost; and I was quite sure that nothing short of some highly tragical exigency would enable me to pass successfully through such an ordeal again. I had never met a madman before in my life; I do not think my mind had ever dwelt upon the subject of madness, as a fancy. Some power, quite foreign to my nature, had buoyed me up during my interview with Mr. Ransome; and my own tact had enabled me to exert the influence that his bearing had shown me I possessed over him, successfully. But that power had deserted me now. I felt certain that without it my influence would be worthless; and the mere thought of having to deal with him again was thoroughly alarming.

Of course the servants were ignorant of the true reason of old Mrs. Ransome's sudden vacation of the house. I heard them attributing it to the mistress's determined opposition, and the cook applauded her courage.

Meanwhile I listened anxiously and nervously for the sound of Mr. Ransome's footsteps in the hall. Suppose he came home as sane, let us say, as he was that day when he paid me his mysterious visit in order to announce his wife's madness to me? I had no influence over him then, or signs of it would have appeared, and I should have remembered them. Or suppose he returned home as insane as he was that night when he left the marks of his cruel fingers on his wife's arm. From the standpoint of either supposition my look-out was an intensely disagreeable one.

Six o'clock came and dinner was served, but only one was there to eat it. When another hour had passed my room grew too dark to enable me to continue sewing. I went upstairs very cautiously and carefully, listening lest Mr. Ransome should have returned unheard by me, and hurried through the hall, meaning to kill half an hour before the twilight should give me an excuse for lighting my lamp, in taking some exercise in the grounds.

The hall door stood open. I gained the lawn and walked quickly towards the kitchen.

gardens, the least frequented portion of the estate. How glorious was the summer evening ! The heat of the sun was gone, though the sun shone brightly away on my right, where, upon the level horizon—for the hills filled the landscape to the left—many great clouds were grouped, and promised a noble sunset. The sky was a soft Italian blue, and the rich green of the trees stood out exquisitely against it, and produced a harmony of tints that was almost saddening with excess of beauty. I chose the shelter of the pea-beds, and breathed with a bounding pulse the pure sweetness of the breeze which shook the homely vegetation around me, and kept the numerous insects constantly on the wing. The house in the distance looked the picture of an English gentleman's home. There were brilliant stars kindled by the setting sun in its windows; the bright glare made the walls white, and enriched with magical effects of shadow the pretty pillared terrace, surmounted with flowers, the gleaming drawing-room windows and the soft colours of their drapery. Mrs. Ransome was right in not allowing her husband to drive her from such a home. The question was, would separa-

tion from him involve her leaving the house? Could she compel her husband to quit Gardenhurst? I could not say. It seemed to me that if she separated from her husband, then, in order to save herself from being persecuted by him if he had a mind to haunt her, she would have to quit the home she loved, and either exile herself in some foreign country or become a kind of fugitive in her own. She had certainly one remedy—she could have him placed in an asylum. Such control might be imperative hereafter, if it were not necessary and merciful now. And yet, though I enforced this matter on the attention of Mrs. Ransome, I must own that I had always done so with no shallow sense of the inhumanity of the proposal.

Mr. Ransome had not returned when I reached the house. There was nothing unusual in his prolonged absence, but I wished he would come home, for I wanted to see what he would do.

A little before eight o'clock I was astonished by hearing the sound of the piano in the drawing-room—the first time the instrument had been played since I had been in the house. The performer's touch was firm ; she

played in octaves, and filled the whole house with the music. The air, whether a waltz or not, was played in waltz time, and so cheerful, so gay, so melodious was it, that my feet began to move in the most mysterious manner, and I think through the magic of that tune I could have waltzed accurately without ever having learned the dance.

The servants came out of the kitchen to listen, and seemed highly delighted. Mary, the better to hear, went upstairs, and I was thinking of calling her down, when a new direction was given to my thoughts by the alarming crash of a door being shut, and by the sound of the music ceasing all at once.

"I'll wager her husband's come back and stopped her!" the cook said.

"Could she have seen him coming?" replied Susan. "It isn't two minutes ago since she began."

The girl's remark put an idea into my head. Was Mrs. Ransome swelling her triumph over her mother-in-law with music, and timing the performance so that her husband might just catch her at it? If so, then she deserved what might follow. She knew that his passions were not under his

control, and she had no right to anger him. Whatever her motives might be, I considered that she showed bad taste in playing the piano at that particular time, when she might expect her husband's return at any moment; and when the sounds, so very unusual in that house, might be interpreted by him as a kind of crowing over the victory I had won for her.

I was so vexed with her that I shut my door to prevent any sound from reaching me that might excite me into running to them and interrupting the quarrel. However, I was too nervous, and too apprehensive of the man's total want of self-control to keep myself long in suspense. I opened the door and listened, but could hear nothing; and questioning whether Mr. Ransome *had* come home, and whether the door had not been banged by a draught, I went back to my chair, drew the lamp closer to me, and resumed my needle.

But scarcely had I made a dozen stitches when footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Mary thrust her head into my room, her face quite white, and her eyes reflecting honest terror.

"Oh, Miss!" she exclaimed, in a loud whisper, "they're quarrelling awfully upstairs. I hear mistress tell master she would kill him, and he gave a loud laugh and said that he always knew she was capable of murder, and he wished she would kill him, for it would do his soul good, wherever it were, to know that she was hanged."

"You have no right to listen," I exclaimed angrily, but very frightened too. "You'll get yourself into trouble some of these days with that mean trick."

"I went to listen to the music," she answered: "how could I tell that she'd stop playing? I didn't know master was there. He must have walked in through one of the windows, and, oh! there will be murder done! I'm sure of it! Mistress's passion is something awful."

I pushed past her heedless of risks in my resolution to stop this miserable quarrel. I walked hastily to the drawing-room door, afraid that my courage would abandon me if I gave myself time for thought: but I heard no sound as I opened the door, and when I entered I found Mrs. Ransome alone.

She was standing in the middle of the



room, her hair in disorder, her bosom rising and falling with her fierce breathing; and scarcely had she seen me, when she shrieked out—

“Tell him to keep away from me or I shall kill him!”

“For Heaven’s sake control yourself, madam!” I exclaimed. “Where is Mr. Ransome?”

“There—in the grounds! he left me in time—I should have killed him!” she panted, pointing furiously towards the open window, at which I glanced without seeing Mr. Ransome.

“*Pray* do not use such expressions,” I said. “Why, madam, do you put yourself in his way? Why do you excite him?”

“How do you mean, excite him?” she cried, turning her brilliant eyes upon me. “I was playing the piano and he came in noiselessly and kicked the door to, and ordered me to stop playing. Of course I refused. I told him to go away and went on playing. And the wretch,” she said, through her teeth, “seized me by the shoulder and dragged me away—look at the music-stool! it fell down when he dragged

me—and I felt the coward's nails in my shoulder! Brute! madman!" she shrieked: "I'll kill him for his treatment of me! I'll kill him!"

She quivered from head to foot with rage.

Just then Mr. Ransome showed himself at one of the windows under the verandah. He stared in with his strange eyes and a white smile twisting his face into positive ugliness. I made a step towards him, meaning to advise him to keep away; but when he saw me advancing, he wheeled around and walked off quickly.

She had not seen him, and after standing in silence awhile, struggling as though to recover her breath, she went to the piano and closed it with a bang, and stood beside it with her eyes fixed downwards.

"Think," she exclaimed, in a low bitter whisper, "of his laying his hand upon me! think that there is no horrible degradation to which I may not at any moment be subjected by this barbarous man!"

I saw her clench and open her hands, and then she came towards the door and made as though she would walk away without further speech; but stopped suddenly.

Pained and harassed as I was, I could not help admiring the wonderful dignity her vehement resentment, her lacerated pride, communicated to her movements. The light in the room had not permitted me clearly to see her face before : but now she was close to me I observed how peculiarly the character of her beauty was adapted to the tragical emotions which then possessed her. Her face was marble-coloured with wrath ; her eyes glowed ; her black, narrow eyebrows were knitted into a violent frown which had the effect of contracting the skin upon her forehead and bringing her hair appreciably lower, and thus giving shadow and force to the gloomy expression that darkened her countenance. I watched her with much the sort of fear that I had believed Mr. Ransome would excite in me and could scarcely credit that the influence I had exercised over her husband should be denied to her.

“ Are you not sick of these scenes ? ” she exclaimed. “ Do they not disgust you ? Oh ! what words have I to express the sense of utter degradation they fill me with ? ”

I would hazard no protests. She was not in the mood to endure the least reproach—

to tolerate the smallest word of advice. I held my tongue, keeping my eyes averted.

“Can you imagine,” she continued, “what my feelings are when I look back and think of the respect and affection which were given me when I was Miss Kilmain? When I compare what I was with what I am—in those days admired and petted and followed, and now shunned and ill-treated, and infamously, O God! *how* infamously humiliated! It is my own fault. I refused the love of a man who would have honoured me as a lady, and gave my hand to a heartless coward who, mad as he is, pretends to a greater madness that he may the better insult me and humble me! How shall I end this? I have brought the curse upon myself: am I not privileged to rid myself of it? But how? *how*? Is there no refuge for such miserable women as I but the publicity that adds shame to the sorrow it does not cure? Must I take the whole world into my confidence to free myself from this monster? Oh, there is no pity among men for women! The laws men make protect themselves, not us. Think now, how helpless I am. You talk to me of a madhouse:

but do you conceive the infamy, the charge of heartlessness, the bitter falsehoods, the galling aspersions on my sincerity as a wife, on my common humanity as a woman which would follow his detention in an asylum? Imagine yourself a stranger to me. You hear of my husband being in a madhouse, of my having directed him to be confined, and what are your conclusions? Are they not cruelly prejudicial to me? I should have kept him at home, obtained tender guardians for him, nursed him myself, watched over him! Oh, you know how the world cants! how it gives nothing—how it exacts everything. Let me tell the world I hate this man: I am judged and condemned a monstrous sinner for my candour. Shall I go into the highway and pull my sleeve above my arm and exhibit the marks of his fierce hand upon my flesh? Shall I bare my shoulder and point to the laceration of his nails there? and invite the crowd to observe these things and bear witness for me when I call him ruffian and coward? The world loves such secrets. It would not lose a syllable of them. Shall I entertain it with a full sight of my heart, all the misery that lies there, all the

bitter memories, the dark hopelessness? Others may do this. I would rather die a hundred times over!"

She continued looking at me for a moment or two after she had ceased speaking with a frown that made her gaze passionately earnest and scrutinizing: then gathering up her skirt, walked quickly across the hall into the dining-room and closed the door upon herself.

X.

She had asked me if I was sick of these scenes. I must own that I was; but then disgust did not follow until the storm was over, for the passion in these quarrels was so great and absorbing that, as a mere spectator, one was hurried away by it to the total neglect of all moral considerations. But I felt how degrading they were when the tumult was stilled and I had composure enough to reflect properly. One after another they had come, making a series which, beginning with their married lives, was to end never whilst they lived together.

However, I might stand in the drawing-

room thinking and puzzling all night without doing any good ; so I closed the windows and went downstairs.

That foolish girl, Mary, had been telling the others how she had heard mistress threaten master's life, and how master had threatened to kill mistress, and how she had heard a terrible crash which she made sure was mistress who had been knocked down (which must have been the music-stool that had been upset in the unseemly scuffle at the piano). They were jabbering away in mysterious voices on these texts when I passed the kitchen, and I heard the cook make use of the following bloodthirsty observation with great emphasis:—"That if ever mistress did kill the master she (the cook) for one would stand up and say it served him right, and call upon other vicious husbands to take warning by his fate."

Rather horrified by this very sanguinary view of the situation, and hoping to check the conversation, I put my head in and asked where Mr. Ransome was.

"In the library, ain't he?" answered Maddox, who sat with his back to the door, and spoke without turning his head.

"Mary," I exclaimed, holding up my finger, "remember the caution I gave you just now. Be careful!"

With which solemn admonition I withdrew, leaving it to produce the best effect it might.

At half-past ten the servants had gone to bed, and the house was quiet. Candle in hand, I took my regular rounds, and in the library found signs in a great quantity of cigar-ash of Mr. Ransome having spent the evening there. I bolted the hall-doors, extinguished the hall lamp, and went to my bedroom.

The moon, which rose late now, was just creeping over the hills, and the red, hot-looking planet seemed to increase by the mere force of appropriate effect the sultriness of the night. Breathless and still the land lay black under the dark heavens, but all along the west the summer lightning played, and threw out, for breathless moments at a time, the fine delicate outlines of clouds.

My bedroom was very hot, for the sunshine had been upon it all the afternoon; the candlelight awoke the flies, which buzzed drowsily past my ear, and a great black moth



flew in through the window and disagreeably affected my nerves by the harsh slapping noise it made as its wings struck the ceiling or the wall. Once or twice a moan of wind sounded in the chimney—a brief passage of air that filled the black trees with a strange and solemn note, and took a fanciful meaning from the ear by its abrupt cessation and the breathless stillness that followed it.

I left the window wide open, but drew the curtains close, extinguished the candle, and got into bed. The heat kept me wakeful; I tossed restlessly upon my pillow, practising all the artless little fictions I had been taught as a child by which to invite sleep; such as counting, reciting a scrap of poetry over and over again, keeping my eyes fixed on a portion of the room until all manner of lights swam out of the darkness. I heard the bell of St. George's at Copsford strike the quarter before twelve. How exquisite, how fairy-like was the dainty thrilling of that clear far chime upon the silence! I strained my ear to follow the tremulous echo until it died—and then quite a different sound jarred an instant upon the silence.

It was subdued and muffled. I should scarcely have heard it but for the strained attention of my hearing at that moment. It sounded like the turning of the handle of a door.

I listened, not nervously—such a sound was easily accounted for—but heard nothing more. Now, indeed, I must get to sleep. I should feel the effects of this wakefulness in the morning. I planted my head energetically on my pillow—five, six minutes or more passed—I was still wide awake, and distinctly heard the echo of a footstep in the garden. The noise was such as would be made by the heel of a boot crunching the gravel.

I sat up in my bed and listened, to make sure. The sound was not repeated. Could I have been mistaken? Was it the moth scraping the paper of the wall with its wings? I felt nervous, but I knew not why when I asked myself the question. On so calm a night the lightest sound would be audible, and the footstep of a wayfarer on the high road beyond the walls might strike the ear as though the tread were under the window.

Once again I settled my head on the pillow,

and consoled myself with reflecting that happen what would, there would be daylight at half-past two, and the dawn must bring security. I had fallen at last into the state of semi-unconsciousness which is the delicious preliminary to sound sleep, when I was startled into complete wakefulness by a noise which seemed to have come from the landing just outside my door. My heart beat quickly; I turned my head and listened. The staircase creaked, and then the sense of hearing was occupied by the vexatious throbbing of my heart. Who was outside? Who was moving at this hour? I got out of bed, and, hot as I had found the night, my feet were now as cold as stones. I opened the door and looked out. The landing was pitch dark.

“Is there anybody there?” I called out.

No answer—no sound of any kind. My own voice frightened me. I listened for some moments, then closed the door and returned to bed.

I was not again disturbed. I fell asleep, and when I awoke it was time to get up. The morning was dark. A strong wind swept through the open window and rounded

the curtains like sails. I drew them apart, closed the window, and saw the sky lead-coloured, with heavy rain slanting across the country, the grounds streaming with wet, and the trees swaying wildly to the strong wind. I dressed myself and went downstairs. The servants were about, but not seeing Maddox I asked if he had left his room? Evidently not. I told Susan to go upstairs and call him, and went into the dining-room, where the cook was dusting the furniture. The scene from the window was a desolate one—the sweeping rain, the streaming shrubs, the flowers tossed by the gale and scattering their petals, the gloomy sky with under-clouds resembling smoke sweeping along it.

Susan entered and said, “I’ve been knocking at Maddox’s door, Miss, and can’t make him answer.”

“What causes him to sleep so heavily? He has always been punctual before,” I answered; and I went upstairs, making sure he would get up and answer directly he heard *my* voice.

The bedroom door was closed. I knocked heartily, but got no reply. I knocked again,

and then, greatly wondering, turned the handle and peeped in. The room was empty, and the bed had not been slept in. I looked about me, surprised out of common sense by his absence, for I remember stooping and peering under the bed, and then I opened a closet full of shelves and stared into that.

Since he was not in his room, where was he? Since he had not gone to bed, where had he slept? I hastened below and exclaimed to the cook—

“Maddox did not use his room last night. His bed is untouched.”

“Not use his room!” she answered, quickly. “Why, I see him go into it myself; I said good-night to him as he opened the door.”

“His room is empty. Is he downstairs?”

“He’s not in the kitchen. I haven’t been into your room. But what should he do downstairs all night?”

“What, indeed! but I’ll go and see nevertheless.”

Mary was in the drawing-room; the other housemaid was sweeping the staircase; I would question them presently. I found the door of my room ajar. If none of the

servants had entered it the circumstance was odd, because I was always the last to leave that part of the house at night, and made a point of closing all the doors before going to bed. Maddox was not in the room, everything was precisely as I had left it overnight: the lamp on the table, my workbasket beside it, the book I had been reading, the chair drawn close. I looked into the pantry; I went further, I lighted a candle, and boldly walked into the cellar. Not a trace of the man was visible. I restored the candlestick to its place, and went slowly upstairs, pondering over the noises I had heard the night before. I called the two housemaids, and first I asked them if they had been into my room since they left their beds? No. Were they sure? Certain sure. Did Maddox go upstairs with them when they went to bed last night? Yes. Susan lighted his candle for him at her own on the landing, and she heard cook wish him good night.

“Did any of you hear footsteps outside your bedrooms last night?”

“Lor no, Miss!” cried the cook, in great agitation. (She had a room to herself.)

"I didn't," said Susan. "Did you, Miss?"

"I want to make sure that *I* did by inquiring if any of you did," I replied.

"I won't declare that I didn't, though," said Mary. "Mind, I don't say it was a footstep I heard, but it was a queer noise."

"It was yourself snoring," exclaimed Susan. "I am sure you couldn't have heard anything if I didn't, for you was asleep before me."

"Let us hear about this noise," I said.

"Well, it might have been my fancy," answered Mary, who doubtless found her imagination defied and rendered useless by the simple evidence of her bedroom companion. "If Susan didn't hear it, I suppose it *was* my fancy."

"It is very fortunate that Susan *didn't* hear it," I exclaimed, "or you would probably have made a ghost of it. However, Maddox may take care of himself. If this is a practical joke of his, the want of his breakfast will bring him among us soon enough. And if he has left the house, why then a very indifferent servant has dis-

charged himself, and Mr. Ransome will have to look out for another man."

With which I dismissed them to their duties.

But these easy conclusions by no means represented my own doubts, and the real surprise that the footman's disappearance had given me. I could not forget the noises I had heard, and as they were unquestionably real, they only served to make Maddox's disappearance the more unaccountable, by establishing the theory that he had wandered about and eventually left the house ; and then suggesting the question—what was the object of his midnight quest and ultimate flight ?

However, at that early stage I had no right to assume that he *had* left the house ; and, for the present, I contented myself by supposing that, mysterious as his absence appeared, a word would clear up the mystery, and submit it as an intensely commonplace affair. I will explain what I mean by an instance. A housemaid in a family, the housekeeper to whom was known to me, was found missing from her bedroom one morning, just as Maddox was. At mid-



day came a letter from her father, filled with humble apologies for his daughter's behaviour, saying that she had left the house after the family were in bed, to keep an appointment with her lover, that on her return she found the house door had been blown-to by the wind, and that not knowing what to do, she had walked a distance of seven miles to where he (her father) lived, and knocked them up at four o'clock in the morning, to the horror and dismay of the mother. Some such solution as this, I thought, might attend the conundrum Maddox had bequeathed us.

I noticed in going upstairs that Mr. Ransome's bedroom door was ajar, and I paused a moment, thinking to hear him stirring, that I might tell him of his footman's disappearance. But all was still, and I crept quietly away.

I couldn't help laughing at the mysterious airs the women gave themselves. My reference to the sounds I had heard, coupled with the unaccountable behaviour of the footman, had frightened them; and it was absurd to see them grouped together in the broad daylight, muttering under their

breaths, their superstitious souls grasping at the opportunity to entertain each other with dismal narratives, drawn no doubt from books which you only meet with in the drawers of kitchen-tables and dressers, but related by these simpletons as though they were personal experiences.

Mary had the most to say, and though both the others well knew that there was not the smallest reliance to be placed upon her most solemn asseveration, yet they listened to her with preposterous eagerness, and swallowed her miserable small talk with as many "lors!" "did you evers!" and "fancy nows!" as would fill a whole chapter of this story.

The table was laid for breakfast in the dining-room, and it was now nine o'clock, but Mr. Ransome had not yet made his appearance. This was unusual. He was seldom later than eight, and to the best of my knowledge away out of the house by the half hour. Thus his wife, by leaving her room at nine, generally had the satisfaction of breakfasting alone.

Her bell rang, and Mary answered it, and I suppose did not get her nose fairly past

the door before she was telling Mrs. Ransome all about Maddox's disappearance; for in a few moments she came hurrying to me to say that I was wanted by mistress.

"What is the meaning of the footman's not sleeping in his bedroom, Miss Ivory?" Mrs. Ransome asked me.

"I haven't the slightest idea," I replied.

"Are you *sure* he isn't in his bedroom?"

"Quite sure."

"Nor anywhere in the house?"

"No signs of him at all."

"This is very curious," she said, seating herself. "Have you spoken to Mr. Ransome about it?"

"He hasn't left his room yet," I answered.

She glanced at the clock and said—

"Mary, go and tell the cook to get my breakfast ready on a tray and bring it to my room."

Mary went out reluctantly. She longed to hear our conversation.

"You had better knock at Mr. Ransome's door and tell him what has happened," said Mrs. Ransome. "The footman may have robbed the house."

"I thought that myself: but I have looked about me well and nothing seems to have been touched."

"Didn't you hear somebody walking on the landing outside your room last night?"

"I asked Mary and the others if they had heard the sound of a footstep, but they tell me they did not. I thought myself that I heard the staircase creak, and the handle of a door turned, and then again the crunch of a foot upon the gravel in the grounds."

"You couldn't have been deceived in such sounds."

"Why no, madam. I am pretty sure they were real."

"It must have been Maddox whom you heard," she exclaimed.

"No doubt. I am afraid that something is wrong, unless indeed the man walks in his sleep. When I went downstairs this morning I found the door of my room open. None of the servants had entered before me; and I perfectly remember shutting that door last night, as I do every night, before going to bed."

"Have you looked at the plate-safe?"

"No. At least I have not looked *into* it."

"You should," she exclaimed. "You had better go at once and knock at Mr. Ransome's door."

She was agitated and restless, and made an impetuous gesture as though she would have me be quick.

The door of Mr. Ransome's bedroom was partially open, as I had already noticed. I knocked, but got no answer. I knocked louder, but got no reply to that either. Mr. Ransome must be in a very sound sleep; and I stood irresolute, doubtful whether I should knock a third time or peep in. I did both: I rapped lustily, then pushed the door gently and entered.

Both the blinds and the window-curtains were drawn: and quitting the bright light of the landing I could scarcely see for some moments in the gloom that filled the chamber. But one thing was immediately apparent: Mr. Ransome was not in his bed. More—his bed had not been slept in.

I ran to the windows, and pulled up the blinds. The clouds had broken, the rain had ceased, and the sunshine was streaming brilliantly upon the soaked grounds. I stood astounded to find the bedroom empty;

astounded, because I had not questioned that Mr. Ransome was in the room, and because the exactly similar disappearance of Maddox immeasurably heightened the surprise of *this* disappearance. I hurried to Mrs. Ransome.

"Well, has your knocking aroused him, at last?" she inquired.

"He is not in his room," I answered.

She stared and burst into a loud, strange laugh.

"Has *he* gone too?"

"It seems so. Come and see for yourself, madam. You will find his bed untouched."

She advanced a few steps, stopped, and said, "Are you sure he is not in his bedroom? I do not wish to meet him."

"Quite sure."

She crossed the landing and I followed her.

"This is one of his mad freaks!" she exclaimed, looking around her. "He was here last night; for he came upstairs shortly after me, and I heard him shut his door."

"Has he ever left the house before at night?"

"Never. But the past actions of such a

man furnish no criterion to judge his present actions by," she answered, in a hard tone. There was no surprise in her face. She gazed about her coolly and walked to the window and looked out. "The height is too great for him to have ventured without breaking his leg or his neck," she said, with a laugh. "If he has left the house, he has gone to work like a sane man by opening the doors. I suppose he'll come back when it suits him."

She walked out of the room, and when on the landing said—

"Never mind about Mr. Ransome, Miss Ivory. I am more concerned about Maddox. Go and thoroughly examine your room, and look elsewhere. I have always thought him capable of robbing the house, and I should like to know if he has done so."

I was about to follow her when my eye caught sight of something glittering upon the floor, close against a chest of drawers. I picked it up and found it a sovereign; upon which I called to Mrs. Ransome, "See what I have found, madam."

She came back quickly, asking "What?" I gave her the money, and in doing so caught

sight of a splinter of wood sticking out of one of the locks of the top drawer of the chest. I pulled the handle and the drawer came out, and I saw that the lock had been forced and broken. The drawer contained a few cravats and some stud and pin-cases which were empty.

"This looks like a robbery," I said. "Do you see how the lock has been wrenched?"

"Is this Maddox's doing or Mr. Ransome's?" she answered. "I would as soon believe it my husband's as the other's. There may be some cunning in this to throw us off our guard."

I was rather bewildered by this view of the case, and said—

"What object could Mr. Ransome have in leading us to suppose that he has been robbed?"

"What object has any madman in practising the most stealthy stratagems for the most imbecile ends?" she replied, sharply. "He might wish to frighten me by leading us to suppose that Maddox has robbed and murdered him, for anything I can tell; or the pair of them may be in some wretched conspiracy to get my name about and give



scandal-mongers an excuse for inventing falsehoods about me."

"Did Mr. Ransome keep money in this drawer?"

"I don't know. I am perfectly ignorant of his habits."

"His dressing-case used to stand on the toilet-table; I don't see it there now," I said, looking around me in search of it.

She went to the drawers and pulled them open one after the other. Their contents were tossed, and in such a manner that they might easily have furnished a proof of a thievish hand having routed among them. In looking into the lower drawer, Mrs. Ransome became absorbed in thought; her hands fell to her side, her eyes remained fixed, and she stood motionless. Then she suddenly broke away, stared quickly around, and said—

"Thinking will not explain anything. This leaving the house is an unaccountable act, and I'll not condescend to bestow a thought upon it."

Saying which, with a suggestion of extraordinary perversity in her tone, she passed into her bedroom.

I lingered a few minutes, looking about me for any hints to help to a conclusion. One fact was obvious: Mr. Ransome was gone. But had he been robbed? The sovereign I had found on the floor might have slipped out of his pocket: his own hand might have broken the lock of the drawer in a passion. How could I tell that anything was missing? I did not know what he had in his drawers and wardrobe. The dressing-case was gone, indeed; but he might have taken it with him. As to the rumpled state of the wearing apparel in the lower drawers, this might have been owing to his own impatience. Had he been robbed, and if so by whom? Mrs. Ransome had heard him shut his bedroom door; a sufficiently conclusive proof that he had *entered* his bedroom. At what hour then had he quitted it? If Maddox had robbed him, he could not have robbed him whilst he was in his bedroom. Neither would he have robbed him before he entered his bedroom, for the obvious reason that Mr. Ransome would discover the robbery on entering the room. It was even more unlikely that Maddox would have committed the robbery

after Mr. Ransome had quitted the house ; because the sight of the untouched bed would suggest that his master was still downstairs or had not yet retired to rest, and that he might come to his room at any moment and find Maddox there.

Taking these theories for what they were worth, I felt strongly disposed to concur in Mrs. Ransome's view—namely, that the disappearance of both master and man was a conspiracy between them, designed for a purpose I could not imagine, but designed no doubt to bring anxiety, grief, and humiliation upon the wife.

The broken lock, the sovereign on the floor, the rumpled drawers, the missing dressing-case, might all be so many cunning details devised for the purpose of complicating the mystery. There might be a special subtlety in the very unobtrusiveness of the signs which had been created to establish a theory of robbery. A great air of confusion and disorder in the room might, by the very officiousness of the details, set conjecture on the right track.

I went to the door and turned the handle to try if the movement would produce the

same sound I had heard overnight. But this was a failure, for the handle made no noise at all. I then descended the stairs and entered my room, and had a good stare at the old-fashioned safe, in which the plate was locked. There were no external signs whatever to denote that it had been touched.

I had brought the keys of the various closets, &c. with me from my bedroom, whither I always carried them at night; they made a big bunch, and the stoutest and most intricately-cut of them all belonged to the safe, which was of iron, and I should think upwards of fifty years old. Hence the lock, as you may conceive, was no very ingenious patent; but it was secure as any old lock can well be, with a stout plate of steel over the bolt which the mouth of the key fitted; whilst the key was so contrived as to sink below each side of the plate and to withstand any amount of pressure if it was not exactly adjusted to the plate.

I inserted the key and opened the heavy iron door. The safe was empty.

I was struck motionless, doubting the evidence of my own senses. To appreciate the full significance of this discovery you

must know that amongst my other duties was the business of locking the plate away every night. Every night before going to bed Maddox brought me all the silver that had been in use throughout the day in the plate-basket, and remained in my room whilst I counted it, after which I put it in the safe and locked it up. He had done this every night since I had been in the house ; he had done this the night before. The only portion of the silver that had been left out were some spoons which went up on the tray with the water and glasses. But these spoons I had found in the dining-room and library and they were now in the kitchen. The plate in use represented but a very small portion of the silver contained in the safe. To find this safe empty, then, was a discovery that perfectly overwhelmed me.

I ran upstairs.

"All the plate is stolen !" I exclaimed :  
"the safe is empty !"

Mrs. Ransome uttered an exclamation, while the brush with which Mary was operating on her mistress's hair fell from her hand and her mouth flew open.

"All the plate gone !" cried Mrs. Ransome.

"Yes," I replied: "every bit of it!"

"Then this accounts for Maddox's disappearance? He must have stolen your keys."

"No; he couldn't have done that. The keys were in my trunk, and I am positive nobody entered my room last night."

She was silent, and then said, "What's to be done?"

"The police ought to be told," said Mary.

"Certainly," I replied. "Are there any police at Copsford?"

"Oh yes," cried Mary. "I know the Inspector well. He's a friend of father's. Shall I run for him, ma'am?"

"Yes." But she must first finish doing Mrs. Ransome's hair. She achieved her task with extraordinary celerity, and then hastened away.

The conversation between Mrs. Ransome and me was very discursive and scarcely worth chronicling, being on my side at all events, chiefly ejaculatory. But one notion Mrs. Ransome had got into her brain—which my latest discovery seemed rather to confirm than shake—and that was, that the whole

business from beginning to end was a conspiracy against her, planned by her husband, and helped by Maddox.

"I don't know what it means—what his object is," she exclaimed, as we went downstairs, "but the mere fact of their having left the house together is conclusive that this double disappearance is a planned affair. Oh, Miss Ivory! my husband is wicked and mad enough to do anything."

"I believe that myself," I answered. "But allowing the largest licence to the actions of madness, I cannot see how Maddox's stealing the plate can help any plot against your peace of mind that Mr. Ransome may meditate."

"Nor I; but Mr. Ransome can explain, I daresay, and with his mysterious forefinger and brutal smile show us how utterly mad he is by this his last scheme."

"What shall we say to the Inspector when he comes? Suppose he hits upon your idea, but without guessing the motive of the act, that Mr. Ransome and his man have gone off and taken the plate with them, what will be the effect upon the neighbours when

they hear the mutilated story? Will they not declare that Mr. Ransome has actually robbed his own house?"

She laughed and looked grave in a moment.

"We should have thought of this before sending for the Inspector. I am sure I don't want such people here. They seldom do any good, and his visit is certain to set people talking. It is Mary's doing. The girl is a perfect fool and runs mad on the merest hint of excitement. We ought to have deliberated a little before sending to Copsford." She grew uneasy and left her chair and moved restlessly about the room. We were in the dining-room, and I was talking to her whilst she waited for her breakfast.

"Perhaps," she suddenly exclaimed, "this is a part of Mr. Ransome's plot. He judged that on our discovering the robbery the police would be summoned."

"There is nothing humiliating in summoning the police in order to point out a robbery," I answered, seeing her pause.

"But there is in the gossip that will follow. People are so detestably knowing. They put two and two together and make



five. 'If the footman had quitted the house alone, we could understand,' they will say; 'but why should Mr. Ransome run away on the same night, and no doubt at the same hour?' and not being able to find an answer they will invent one, and who can tell what monstrous fictions may get about?"

The entrance of Susan at this juncture interrupted the conversation, and I left the room. While Mrs. Ransome breakfasted I occupied the time by further explorations, and by asking the servants questions. But neither my researches nor my interrogations were of any use. The two servants could throw no light on Mr. Ransome's disappearance. I asked them if they had ever noticed Mr. Ransome and Maddox conversing together with any air of familiarity. Never. Had it struck them that Mr. Ransome had treated his man with more forbearance latterly. No—quite the contrary. A day or two ago Susan had heard Mr. Ransome storming at Maddox in his bedroom. How had Susan heard this? In passing the bedroom. Was she sure that Mr. Ransome did not know that she was passing? Not unless he could see through a wall.

I was in the kitchen when Mary, after nearly two hours' absence, returned with the Inspector. The girl, who was breathless but in high spirits, came running downstairs to tell me I was wanted. I heard her cackling like a hen to the cook as I made my way upstairs, and gathered, even in that brief time, enough to lead me to suppose that the Inspector had been put by her in possession of a very great deal more information than it was possible for any living being, in the present state of knowledge, to communicate.

The Inspector was a bald, big man, with strong whiskers, a frogged coat, pantaloons tightly strapped down over his boots, and small black eyes lodged in deep caverns and protected with a regular furze of eyebrow. He sat on the extreme edge of a chair, opposite Mrs. Ransome, who looked nervous and pale and worried.

The moment I entered the room the Inspector told me to sit down, as if that were an indispensable part of the proceedings, without which there was no getting on at all. He then opened a broadside of questions upon me, deeply puzzling himself occasionally by the magnitude of his knowing-

ness. I was to describe Maddox. I was then to relate my habits—when I locked the safe, where I put the keys—with a great number of other questions all having regard to Maddox only; whereby I was led to believe that no reference had been made to Mr. Ransome's disappearance, until he suddenly turned to Mrs. Ransome and said—

“You're husband has gone too, ma'am, hasn't he?”

“He did not occupy his bedroom last night.”

“How might that be now?”

“I really do not know.”

“It's not to be supposed that he was acquainted with this here footman's intention to rob the house?”

“It would not be a robbery if the plate were removed with Mr. Ransome's sanction.”

“Just so,” answered the Inspector, looking enlightened; “that's just what I am driving at. Anything suspected?”

“What?”

“I ask, ma'am——”

“I desire the benefit of your suspicions,” said Mrs. Ransome, restlessly.

"Then, if you please, I'll search the house."

"Will you take the Inspector upstairs, Miss Ivory?"

The man followed me to Mr. Ransome's bedroom. I showed him the broken lock, and told him how I had found a sovereign on the floor, and how I missed Mr. Ransome's dressing-case. Did I know what was in the dressing-case? Valuables, for instance? Bank-notes, say? No; I was quite ignorant of the contents of the box. He opened the drawers, he peered under the bed, he shook the window-curtains, he looked out of the window, he folded his arms and gazed sternly around him. He was a very knowing Inspector indeed. He went to my bedroom, and I showed him my trunk where I put the keys, and I explained to him that it was impossible for Maddox or anybody else to have entered my room when I was in bed, and pulled the trunk from under the bed, and opened it, and taken out the keys, which were certain to jingle, all without my hearing him. And he agreed with me. After this he examined Maddox's room, where in a drawer we found a piece of candle, a pipe,

a box of lucifer-matches, a portrait of a lady in bronze paper, and the book concerning the adventures of Jerry Abershaw. The Inspector eyed the book gravely, but made no observation, and desired me to take him to the plate-safe. So we journeyed downstairs, where the safe stood open; and he looked inside it and outside it, and examined the key and applied it to the lock, and then scrutinized the lock—all with an air of profound wisdom, as though he should say, "Everything is clear to my mind, young woman, but that is *my* secret."

However, his face wronged his judgment, for, so far from everything being clear to his mind, he exclaimed, smiting his knee, that he couldn't make head or tail of the business—that it looked like a robbery, but that it mightn't be a robbery—that if Maddox worked alone, he was the thief; but that if Mr. Ransome set him to work he wasn't the thief—that he was puzzled when he thought of them both going off the same night; and that he would like to speak to the mistress, please.

I took him to the dining-room, and there left him. He went away after he had been

alone with Mrs. Ransome for about a quarter of an hour, and she came downstairs to my room.

Her discomposed manner was easily attributable to the uncomfortable vocation of her recent visitor.

"Close the door, Miss Avory," she said; "I don't want the servants to overhear us."

I did as she bade me, and said—

"What does the Inspector think?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, pettishly, "he is a very stupid man. He asked me a great number of useless and unnecessary questions, and then had to request me to give him directions after all. We ought never to have sent for him. He will now return to Copsford and tell everybody that Mr. Ransome has run away from his wife, and that the footman has run away with the plate, and I shall be as much talked about as if I had run away myself."

"But did not he express an opinion?"

"No: he said he was puzzled. That was substantially all he said, though he wrapped up his meaning in such a variety of arguments and questions that one would suppose he saw the whole thing as clearly as I can see through that window."

"Does he mean to start his people in pursuit of Maddox?" I asked, struck by the air of indifference with which she discussed the subject.

"I'll tell you, as well as I can, what passed between us. He asked me at what hour I supposed the robbery had been committed. I told him it must have happened last night after half-past ten, because you did not go to bed before that time. He then put some irrelevant questions about you, which I cut short, because they were silly. Then he wanted to know if Mr. Ransome had ever before left his house at night without communicating his intentions to do so to me. I answered that he had not, but that he was in the habit of leaving his home sometimes for a day, sometimes for a week, without a word, and as he could do it in the day so he could do it in the night. What sort of character did Maddox bear? I said I knew very little of the man. He was his master's servant, and had been engaged by him, and that he had been in our service six months. After a number of questions of this kind, he said, 'Do you charge this man with having robbed you?' 'The plate has been taken,' I answered;

‘and I suppose Maddox took it. But I will tell you plainly that it is quite as likely as not that he was an instrument in Mr. Ransome’s hand.’ There I stopped, not choosing to enter into further explanations. ‘My duty is very simple,’ he said. ‘If you charge this footman with having robbed you, I will have him apprehended if he can be caught. If you tell me that he has acted in concert with your husband, then you give me to understand that Mr. Ransome is as guilty as he, and that there are two parties to be followed. But that can’t be; for if the footman acted on Mr. Ransome’s instructions, he is no thief, because he is his master’s servant, and is bound to obey him; and the plate is as much your husband’s as yours, and every man has a right to his own. That’s law.’ By this time I was thoroughly tired of the man, though I quite appreciated his bewilderment in not being able to get a direct charge from me. It was out of the question that I should go into family matters with him, and explain that Mr. Ransome was mad, and that all this might be a scheme of his to revenge himself for my treatment of



his mother; and I firmly believe this to be the case. So, in order to get rid of him, I told him that I would consult my friends, and let him know my determination. But I don't mean to consult my friends, Miss Avory. I shall leave matters as they are and wait."

"But suppose," I suggested, "that Maddox has really robbed you; suppose that Mr. Ransome knows nothing about the robbery?"

"I can't suppose anything of the kind. There are seven nights to a week. Is it not too much of a coincidence that they should both take it into their heads to leave on the same night, perhaps at the same hour? I tell you I can't conceive Mr. Ransome's object. As a madman, his actions *must* be unaccountable; but that this double disappearance is some insane conspiracy against me I am as certain as that I am now looking at you."

"What do you propose to do, madam?"

"Nothing. What *can* I do? Suppose my theory is right? I start the police in quest of Maddox, and he is captured; he then confesses the conspiracy between him-

self and Mr. Ransome. Could I ever hold up my head again? God knows, I have been sufficiently degraded as it is. I rarely leave the grounds for a walk—I have a horror of meeting people who used to know me; the scandal would be *too* crushing should it be said that my husband could engage a menial like Maddox to join him in a scheme against me.”

“But when it is known that your husband is mad, would not people be sorry for you, and visit what shame the thing involves upon him?”

“It would not save my name from being mouthed,” she cried, bitterly. “Let Mr. Ransome go; if my freedom had been purchased by the loss of my whole fortune, I should not be one jot less glad than I am now to feel that he is gone. I have but one dread—that he will return. Pray God he will not! Pray God he will not!” she exclaimed with startling vehemence.

I was silent for some moments, and then said—

“If you really believe that Mr. Ransome’s and the footman’s disappearance is a conspiracy against you, you are wise in

maintaining a dignified reserve. His action is an extraordinary one—much too extraordinary to be reconciled to any theory it is possible to form of his ultimate intentions.”

“But never forget that he is mad,” she interrupted.

“No, and that fact *only* can make your conjecture probable. But still, assuming him to be as mad as we will, what possible reason can he have for getting Maddox to steal the plate, or for carrying the plate off with him? What can he do with it?”

“Bury it, perhaps.”

“Maddox must expect a large reward for running the risk of being taken up for the robbery. To tell you the truth, madam, I have always doubted that man’s honesty from a discovery I once made, but which I never chose to repeat, as I had no wish to be thought a talebearer.” I then spoke of the book I had found by his bedside.

“Oh, people in his sphere read anything,” she said. “They delight in stories of murders and robberies. I should lay no stress upon that.”

“Well,” I exclaimed, somewhat discon-

certed, "I am prone, I fear, to form my judgment by trifles. But now comes another question, how did he open the safe?"

"That's one reason I have for believing Mr. Ransome to be in the secret," she answered. "Before you came, he used to keep the key of the safe—that was when we had no housekeeper. There was nothing to prevent him then from having another one made."

"But this notion implies that he has had the scheme in his head for some time."

"I daresay he had."

"But he would be using the key constantly. How could he leave it at a shop whilst it was being copied?"

"He would take the impression of it in wax. Housebreakers manage so, I have read, don't they?"

She suppressed a yawn and got up suddenly.

"We have talked more about this matter than it deserves, Miss Ivory. I shall do nothing—merely wait. I have plenty of patience—when he is not with me: more than he. At the end of some weeks, if I find he still keeps away, I will write to papa."

He is the only friend I should dream of consulting—the only friend whose opinion I would take. But I'll not write yet. I am afraid my troubles are not over. They *will* be over when I find he does not mean to come back."

She walked out of the room abruptly, and I heard her call to Mary to bring her hat from her bedroom as she was going to walk in the grounds.

## XI.

There would have been no mystery in Mr. Ransome's disappearance had he left the house alone. His habits were capricious and unaccountable, well known to us all; and his empty bedroom would merely have suggested the question, "Where is he gone *now?* and how long does he mean to stop away?"

The mystery was created by the simultaneous disappearance of Maddox. The coincidence of their joint departure furnished such strong presumptive evidence of collusion that the detail of the robbery merely served to complicate the enigma of the

madman's motive without shaking the belief that the two men had acted in concert.

There was indeed another view to be taken of the matter : it might be supposed that Maddox had robbed the house without knowing that it was his master's intention to quit it on the same night. But this seemed difficult to realize ; because (speaking for myself) I could not imagine that two men occupying the same house—the house itself by no means a large one—could be stirring on their legs in the dead of night, and in the profound stillness of such a night as that on which these events had happened, without the one hearing the other ; and as the necessity of secrecy (supposing them to have acted independently of each other) was strong on them both, the mere idea to either of the men of the other being about, would be enough to frighten them both back to their beds and force them to defer their several schemes until another opportunity.

The sounds that *I* had heard convinced me as much as anything else that Mr. Ransome and Maddox had acted together ; because the noise resembling the turning of

the handle of a door had come from the landing where Mr. Ransome's bedroom was ; and this had been followed by the creaking of the staircase outside my room—in other words, the stairs belonging to the landing where Maddox's bedroom was. They had followed each other with but a short interval ; hence then I supposed that Mr. Ransome had first left his bedroom, and had been shortly afterwards joined by Maddox.

But the fact of Maddox having run away was no reason why Mr. Ransome shouldn't return. He might walk in at any moment, and enjoy the disappointment of the hope he had kindled in his wife. Meanwhile I wondered what would be thought over at Copsford when the Inspector whispered about that Mrs. Ransome meant to take no action in the matter of the robbery ?

The day passed, the evening came ; but not Mr. Ransome. We were somewhat embarrassed for spoons and forks, and Mrs. Ransome had to make what shift she could for her luncheon and dinner with those which were used in the kitchen. Mary said that she had never heard her laugh so merrily as when she took up one of the two-pronged

iron forks which had been placed on the table.

"It's my belief," the girl said, "that she looks on the loss of her beautiful plate as quite a joke."

I thought the joke that amused her lay in the loss of her husband.

But might not her mirth be premature? While she was laughing over her freedom he might return.

I had a short conversation with her before she went to bed. Her mood rather puzzled me, for her vivacity was made at times inconsistent by abrupt lapses into anxious gravity. She excused herself once for bursting into a laugh when I was talking gravely about Maddox and putting it to her, as I had before done, whether it was not very probable that the man had committed the robbery on his own account; by saying that, somehow, she had a feeling that she would never see her husband again. She had no reason to give for this notion; it might perhaps, she said, be owing to the secret and curious way in which he had left her; but, however it might be, the feeling was strong in her. I am afraid I did not echo her laughter; not



because I thought her fancy improbable, but because I considered that her husband being mad, common humanity demanded that we should take a sober view of his situation, which might be that of a fugitive irresponsible for his actions and likely to come to serious harm if suffered to wander at large without control. I did not express my thoughts, hoping, indeed believing, that she shared them, but that her pride and hate of him would not permit her to take any part that might in the smallest degree be suggestive of hypocrisy.

Before I went to bed that night I carefully examined the fastenings of the doors. If Mr. Ransome should return whilst we were in bed, I was determined that he should play no tricks with my nervous system, but enter the house through the proper channels. A pleasant thing to find him in bed next morning with one of the lower windows burglariously forced!

But the night passed quietly. I remember going downstairs in the morning with much curiosity, scarcely knowing what startling discovery I might make. But all was safe. I was up before the other servants and

frightened the cook nearly into hysterics: for she, not knowing I had left my room, came into the kitchen where I was, and catching sight of me, ran away with a shriek; nor, until I had called her several times, could I persuade her that I was not a burglar whom she had just caught in the act of walking off with the kitchen-table and the whole of the crockery.

At mid-day the postman brought a letter to the house addressed to Saville Ransome, Esquire. The handwriting was a woman's, big and scrawling. I took it to Mrs. Ransome, who said, "It is from his mother."

"I wonder if she has returned to Guildford?" I observed.

"At all events she doesn't know he has left the house, or she wouldn't address him here."

And as she said this she tore open the envelope and read the contents. Her face grew dark and she threw the letter violently on the table when she had read it.

"The hateful old creature!" she exclaimed.

She took up the letter and began to read it aloud—

"I reached home safely at two o'clock, and lose no time to tell you of my arrival. I met Mrs. Emmerson on my way from the coach, and she was quite surprised to see me; and no wonder, for I had told her I should be away for a fortnight. I explained why I had left—that your wife was an insulting, common woman, who locked up the rooms in *your* house and put the keys in her pocket, and would not give me even decent accommodation. 'Poor Saville!' she said. 'What a terrible life he must have of it with such a creature!' 'You may well say that,' I answered. 'She is a most infamous person, with a temper that would disgrace a fishwoman, and proud like all parvenus.'"

"Pray read no more, madam," said I, deprecating both the angry passion that flamed in her eyes and this perusal of a coarse, uninteresting letter not addressed to her. "She is a stupid woman, and quite beneath your notice when she is from under your roof."

She crumpled the letter in her hand and flung it into the grate.

"That's how I would serve her," she

exclaimed. "A parvenu! Oh, think of it!"

She walked about the room and suddenly crossed to the drawing-room, where a moment after she began to play the piano, bursting into a loud noisy air, which she presently changed into a melody wonderfully sweet and soft. If that tune showed the variation in her mood I thought I might safely speak to her on the subject I should have commenced in the dining-room but for that letter.

"Are you going to tell me that I should not play, Miss Ivory?" she exclaimed, as I approached her.

"Oh, dear no, madam."

"The right thing to do, I suppose, under these afflicting circumstances, would be to sit with my hands crossed, and, by way of a coiffure, the nearest approach to widow's weeds my milliner could invent. But then I must first consider what I have to mourn. The loss of my plate? *That* is a serious matter. My dear husband's amiable flight? That should make me wear bright colours and sing and play all day long."

She had raised her hand to strike the piano again, when I said—

"I was thinking, madam, I should like to call upon the Champions. I have not seen them since my arrival here. They were very kind to me when I first came to Copsford. Shall I inconvenience you by leaving the house for an hour or two?"

"Not in the least. Never trouble to speak to me when you wish to take exercise. I shall sometimes join you, I hope, if *he* stops away. I used often to walk long distances with papa, but since I have been companionless I have kept to the grounds. What shall you tell the Champions about Mr. Ransome and his man?"

"As little as I can. To speak the truth my motive in calling on them is to find out what people are saying. I may perhaps be able to check a few fictions. The Champions know a great number of persons."

"That is a good idea. I should like to know what people *are* saying. But do not trouble to contradict anything. Bitterly as I hate the idea of my name supplying the neighbourhood with a subject for tittle-tattle, I would rather that the most absurd falsehoods be circulated than the truth."

She nodded and recommenced her playing.

I left the room and in a few moments was walking towards Rose Farm.

I found Mrs. Campion at home. She was knitting in the garden under the shade of an apple-tree, and gave by her snug, round, healthful presence a finishing detail to the whole picturesque scene.

She ran for a chair, and told me that her husband had gone over to some village in his cart; and then she asked me how I was getting on, which brought our chat to the subject of the Ransomes.

"Is it really true," said she "that Mr. Ransome has run away from his home, and taken all the plate with him?"

"Are people saying that?"

"Oh," she answered, trying to suppress a laugh, because she would think the topic a grave one to me, "all sorts of things are said. I heard this morning that the footman had murdered his master and hid his body, expressly that people should think he had helped him to steal the plate, and was gone off with him! Such nonsense, to be sure! But living in the country is not like living in London, Miss Ivory. In places like Copsford we are bound to know everything our

neighbour says and does. But it's a strange thing to happen, all the same, supposing, of course, it's true."

"If what is true?"

"Why, that Mr. Ransome and his manservant have gone off and taken the plate with them. *Is it true?*"

"I give you my word, dear Mrs. Campion, that I am as ignorant of the truth as you are. All that I can tell you is that Mr. Ransome and Maddox the footman left the house—I don't say together, but pretty nearly at the same hour—and that all the plate has been stolen out of the housekeeper's room. Nothing more is known at Gardenhurst than this. If you can tell me more I shall be grateful."

"Bless you! what should I know?" she exclaimed. "It's everybody's talk just now, and that's how I came to speak of it. And how does the young mistress bear it all?"

"Why, it is not a very pleasant thing to happen in a house. Have you heard whether anybody like Mr. Ransome or Maddox has been met?"

"No, I have heard nothing. I doubt if they've been seen. I should have heard else."

“ Do you know if people have thought it worth while to mention among other things that Mr. Ransome is a madman ? ”

“ Oh, it's well known he was crazy-like. It's only a madman would rob his own house, sure ! And what's Mrs. Ransome going to do ? I suppose she has set the constables after them ? ”

“ What ! after her own husband ! ”

“ Why not ? If *my* husband was mad and was to run away with the footman and things belonging to the house, wouldn't I send after him ? I'd have him caught for his own sake ; and I'd have the footman put into prison for helping his master to make such a fool of himself. ”

“ Rather hard upon a wife to have to give her husband into custody ! ” said I, laughing.

“ Oh, that's right enough. But if he's mad, my dear ? He ought to have a keeper—as I was only saying to John last night, when he was telling me of the fierce quarrels that were always going on between Mr. and Mrs. Ransome : dreadful enough, he said, to make him wonder how you can stand living in such a house. That's just the truth, my



dear, and you'll pardon me for saying so."

"How do you know they quarrel?"

"Oh, it was always known. They lost their friends by it long before you came, as I was told by one of the servants up at the Rayners, where the family were often talking of Mr. Ransome, and saying as how they and people like them couldn't visit a house where they were never safe from being shocked by angry words between the master and mistress. But *you've* seen enough, Miss Avory, I daresay, to prevent you from wondering why they have no friends."

"I have seen enough to convince me that Mr. Ransome is mad; and if I were in Mrs. Ransome's place I should have a very poor opinion of the sincerity of the friends who could visit my lunatic husband's sins and temper on my head."

"Oh, but you'll confess," she exclaimed, smiling and stooping to pick up the ball of worsted that had rolled off her lap, "that Mrs. Ransome can be very aggravating when she pleases."

"I thought you liked her."

"So I do—at least so I did, when she was

Miss Kilmain. But I've seen very little of her since she was married. She was a pleasant lady then, and I tell everybody who speaks of her the same. But right is right, and though I firmly believe that her husband is altogether to blame for spoiling her temper, yet that don't alter the truth that she picks quarrels with him when he'd be quiet, and treats him and his mother in a way that isn't right, considering that she knows he isn't sane. And besides, a mother's a mother, and there's no reason why a lunatic shouldn't have the feelings of a son."

There was a prejudice implied in these remarks which, remembering how kindly Mrs. Campion had before spoken of Mrs. Ransome, somewhat disconcerted me.

"How do you know all this?" I asked her.

"I'll tell you. I drank tea last night at Mrs. Evans's, her whose sister is along with you at Gardenhurst."

"You mean Mary?"

"Yes: Mary. When the girl was sent for the Inspector she met Mrs. Evans in the

road, and told her what her errand was, and all about Mr. Ransome's disappearance and the robbery and everything. And then she spoke of Mrs. Ransome locking up the rooms that her mother-in-law mightn't go into them, and of the dreadful quarrels that took place and were always taking place, and how Mrs. Ransome had once, in her presence, declared she would kill him, and such awful words. She said that she often felt sorry for her mistress, but that there was no denying that she constantly aggravated her husband; and as Mrs. Evans afterwards said, putting it to me, wasn't her locking up the rooms and forcing her husband and mother to take their meals almost in darkness enough to anger a saint? I'm sure *I* should be sorry to say an ill word against Mrs. Ransome, but right is right, and when I heard Mrs. Evans talking I had really nothing to say, for, wicked as Mr. Ransome may be, he deserves pity for wanting his senses, and oughtn't to be made madder than he is by having his mother treated as if she were no better than a common servant."

I suppressed the indignation which the thought of Mary's dangerous gossip had excited in me, and answered—

“You may take my honest word for it that though all that Mary has repeated is substantially correct, Mrs. Ransome has been most inhumanly treated both by her husband and her mother-in-law, and that there is not a single action she has committed since I have been in her service which I am not prepared to justify. Though you should learn ten times more from Mary than what you have already heard, you would still know but a very small portion of the truth. I have less reason than Mary to sympathize with Mrs. Ransome, having known her but a few weeks against the two years Mary has been with her. You may therefore believe me when I say that the gossip that represents her as having aggravated or in any way offended or injured her husband, is a direct falsehood; and that her treatment of her mother-in-law is angelic in comparison with what that offensive, false-tongued little woman deserves.”

“Well, well, Miss Avory,” exclaimed Mrs. Campion, taking my hand and pressing

it, "we'll not speak of them any more. You know the truth better than I do, and I am sorry to have said anything to have vexed you. I wonder if there are any strawberries left. Come and see. I can give you a rare treat of cream with any we can find. I wish John would come home. You'll stay to tea?"

This I said I should not be able to do. However, I walked with her to her strawberry beds, and there we found as much fruit as would have lasted me a week. I was grateful to her for having checked a conversation which might only have resulted in leaving upon us both an uncomfortable impression. I stopped with her until four, talking of my duties at Gardenhurst, and hearing her tell about her farm, and the wages her husband paid, and the earnings he averaged, pacing the while her garden, where the beds were edged with high box, and the beds filled with old-fashioned flowers, stocks, pansies, sweet williams, with glorious shining roses intermixed in abundance, and lilies baring their breasts of snow to the sky. I brought the conversation again to the Ransomes, by begging her not to heed the gossip she might

hear, and to remember my honest assurance that Mrs. Ransome had lived a miserable life with her husband, and deserved the deepest compassion.

"Didn't I tell you," said she, evading the point, "that you would hear of queer goings on in that house before you had been there a month? You haven't been there that time yet, and I don't suppose anything more singular could have happened in any family in England than the running away of the master and the footman with the plate and such like valuables."

"That is the theory," I said, "but it is not proved yet, and until some kind of evidence turns up, I for one, shall refuse to have any opinion one way or the other upon the subject. I suppose we are sure to hear something soon. Somebody who knows one or the other of them is sure to meet them and report. The world is very small, and we are always falling in with acquaintances, go where we may."

Saying this I shook hands with her, received a warm invitation to come again soon, and walked towards Gardenhurst.

If I had not learnt very much of what was being said about this disappearance, I had got one piece of useful information from Mrs. Campion, and that was, that Mary was a very dangerous girl to have in one's house, and that if she were not dismissed, or her gossip silenced, she would make a great deal of mischief. I had taken particular notice of Mrs. Campion's prejudice against Mrs. Ransome. Of itself it would not have been worth a thought, but, as an illustration of what others were thinking, it was sufficiently menacing. It was true that Mrs. Campion knew more (thanks to Mary) than other people could yet know, but then, on the other hand, she had always professed to like Mrs. Ransome, and this change in her would express the conclusions which other people would arrive at, who were guided by a smaller knowledge of the facts, but who were not influenced by the same partiality.

Speaking for myself, I never sympathized with Mrs. Ransome's strong dislike of gossip. If Jones's sneer or Brown's shrug can make you unhappy, then you must look for a great deal of trouble before you die. But

though I had no sympathy with her aversion, I had to see it ; and my real compassion for her trials and sufferings, and also the duty I owed her, to act as something more than a mere housekeeper to her in these days of trouble and anxiety, made it incumbent on me to recognise her hatred of scandal, in order the better to screen her from it, as far as it lay in my power to do so.

I had not reached the house ten minutes before she sent for me. She was in the drawing-room, a portfolio of music lay on the sofa beside her, and she was turning the sheets over as I entered.

"Did you find the Campions at home?" she asked me.

"Yes, madam."

"What a pretty place Rose Farm is, isn't it? I used to like Mrs. Campion very much, and wonder that she doesn't come to see me. Did she speak of me?"

Her manner was full of undisguised eagerness to hear what I had to tell.

"Yes, and had she lived in this house I don't think she could be more perfectly acquainted with the *facts* of everything that



has happened both before I came and since I have been here."

"How is that?" she asked, flushing up.

"The plain truth is this, madam, your servant Mary is a gossip. She has a sister at Copsford to whom she has related the whole story of Mr. Ransome's disappearance and the robbery. The story taking no doubt many exaggerations from its transit through the sister, has become formidable enough to prejudice so amiable a person as Mrs. Campion."

"Ring the bell, Miss Ivory," she exclaimed, starting up with a face full of anger.

"One moment, madam. Do you mean to dismiss Mary or reprimand her?"

"Dismiss her, and at once. How dare she talk out of my house? Ring the bell, if you please."

"Pray forgive me for offering an opinion. I would not dismiss her. Have you ever cautioned her before against this dangerous habit of hers?"

"Certainly not, I would not trouble to caution her. I have a horror of these gossiping creatures, and the servant whom I

find guilty of talking of my affairs out of my house, must leave me."

"I have not one word to say in her defence. But I would strongly recommend you, madam, not to dismiss her on these grounds. She might grow malicious and invent falsehoods out of revenge."

"What falsehoods? What have I to fear?" she cried, staring at me.

"You have to consider that Mr. Ransome's disappearance may have a vicious purpose; and I should take care not to strengthen his hands by creating enemies of people like Mary, who know enough of what has passed in this house to be able to erect formidable fictions on the basis of certain truth."

"I don't understand you," she exclaimed, "Mary knows that my husband and I quarrel—that I hate him—that he is a madman—that his treatment of me has been monstrous ever since she has lived with me. Let her go and tell people that. I am not afraid of the truth. But I will not suffer an eavesdropper to remain in my service. How *dare* she go and gossip about my

affairs, knowing how I detest to have my name discussed!"

"She has the excuse of having spoken only to her sister."

"I don't care. She has no right to speak to her sister."

"Will you not try what a reprimand will do? If that fails, then let me give her notice under the excuse that you do not require three servants. I am convinced," I exclaimed with energy, "that it is not your policy to let her know you have dismissed her for talking. People will wonder what secrets you have which you are ashamed of hearing repeated."

This was a bold and unlucky remark.

"People are more likely to wonder," she cried, scornfully, "that I could submit to have my home affairs talked of by a senseless servant. Will you ring the bell, Miss Ivory?"

Her impetuous order was no longer to be disobeyed. I had not yet received a more convincing proof of her sensitiveness to the opinions of others than her present anger.

Susan answered the bell.

"Send Mary to me," exclaimed Mrs. Ransome; and when the girl had gone, she added: "Surely, Miss Ivory, you do not want me to be afraid of my own servants?"

"If the motive of Mr. Ransome's disappearance were clear I should not dream of opposing your dismissal of Mary," I answered. "But since his absence puzzles us, how must it puzzle others who would readily swallow any inventions they might hear? For that reason I would deal with Mary cautiously."

"But what can the girl invent?" she demanded, impatiently.

"She can set people talking."

"Of what?"

"Of you."

"Yes, of me! she can tell the truth or she can tell lies; and what then?"

"But you do not wish to be talked about, madam."

"No; and that is why——"

Mary knocked and entered. I was about to leave, but Mrs. Ransome signed to me to stop.

"When is your month up?" she inquired, frowning at the girl.

"On Wednesday week, ma'am," answered the girl, looking at her.

"Miss Ivory will pay you your wages up to that time and you can leave to day."

"What have I done?" asked the girl, turning pale.

"You have taken the liberty of talking of me among your friends—telling the secrets of this house and gossiping to everybody who will listen to you."

"I've not talked more than other people," answered the girl sulkily, and with a glance at me that said, "I have to thank you for this."

"Other people may say what they like," cried Mrs. Ransome, angrily. "But you who live in this house, who see and hear things which other people know nothing about, act with unwarrantable impertinence, and prove yourself totally unfit for any place of trust in carrying your mean and dangerous gossip into the streets. That will do!" she exclaimed, waving her hand. "You will leave my house at once."

The girl walked to the door and, I thought, was going straight out; but she stopped and said—

"Wherever I go I shall tell the truth."

"Mind you do!" responded Mrs. Ransome. "And now leave the room."

She was about to say something more ; but Mrs. Ransome, sprang up, and she hurried out, slamming the door after her.

"Now let her go and tell the others," said Mrs. Ransome, with her eyes gleaming. "She will save me the trouble of cautioning them to mind their own business. Miss Ivory, please pay the girl what is owing to her, and see that she is out of the house by six o'clock."

I found Mary crying when I went downstairs, but she wiped her eyes when she saw me, and turned away.

"I am sorry——" I began.

"Don't speak to me!" she cried. "You tale-bearer! you've done this for me."

I bit my lip and answered, "You have done it for yourself. I cautioned you some time ago against opening your mouth so wide about your master and mistress. You are properly treated, and your manner now satisfies me that I have done my duty in telling Mrs. Ransome the truth about you."

I then handed her her wages and went to my room. In less than half an hour she had left the house.

## XII.

Mary was not replaced. Two servants were quite enough to do the housework. Indeed, I began to think that I was of very little use to Mrs. Ransome, and said so when I asked her if she wished for another girl to attend upon her. She answered that I was mistaken ; she could not do without me ; and was good enough to say that she regarded me more as a companion than a housekeeper. Susan took Mary's post, and pleased Mrs. Ransome more than the other had done. This girl was an excellent servant, quiet, respectful, and diligent.

On the fourth day following the disappearance of Mr. Ransome, an old gentleman named Skerlock, a magistrate, called at the house, and had an interview with Mrs. Ransome. She afterwards told me the object of his visit.

He had heard of the robbery, of Mr. Ran-

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mit to Mrs. Ransome the need of having her husband followed ; since common humanity demanded that a man not master of his reason should not be suffered to wander at large.

Mrs. Ransome thanked the old gentleman for his visit, and assured him that her husband's absence gave her no uneasiness. It had often been his humour to leave her without notice ; and it was probable that these eccentricities had given rise to the report of his madness. She was much obliged to Mr. Skerlock for his sympathy and advice ; but some time must elapse before she could consider herself justified in viewing her husband's disappearance in a grave light. With regard to the apparent robbery of the plate and Maddox's flight, she would reserve her opinion until her husband returned.

She described Mr. Skerlock leaving her in an amusingly mystified state of mind.

"Ought I to have told him," she exclaimed, "that my husband is a madman with the passions of a devil ? that I *hate* him ? that my prayer morning and evening is that he may never return, that we may never

meet again ? That would have shocked the amiable old man ; but it is true—it is Heaven's truth. I will not lift a finger to have him followed. But I am bound to feel grateful to Mr. Skerlock for taking the trouble to call," she added, satirically.

As the days wore on other people called ; persons I was told who had not set foot in Gardenhurst for a year. They came to sympathize, to offer their services. One or two of these visitors had been on intimate terms of friendship with Mrs. Ransome before her marriage ; of course I could not tell how she received these visitors or what their conversation was ; but I know she believed them more curious than friendly, a view of them which would make her very hard and obstinate and reticent on the subject that had attracted them. Had I been in her place I would have denied myself to these callers. They had forfeited (as old acquaintance) all friendly claims upon her, whether rightly, or wrongly matters not ; and this would have given her a good obvious motive for keeping herself out of sight.

I am not sure that the state of suspense in which she was then living was not more

secretly trying to her than the misery and trouble which were presently to come. The worst was known then ; but now the vexations and harassing doubts as to her husband's object and whereabouts and return to her, must have galled and fretted her impatient spirit inexpressibly. So at least I would think when talking with her sometimes. She forced a cheerful manner upon herself, was often at the piano, would laugh loudly over trifles ; but there was an artificiality about her good spirits I could not mistake. Her resolution to enjoy her freedom drove her behaviour beyond the limits of becoming mirth, and thus I felt the unsoundness of her light-hearted manner. She was as a reveller who, conscious that the morrow must bring trouble, seeks to drown thought in clamorous merriment. I have seen her enter the drawing-room laughing loudly over some trifling rejoinder she has made me ; I have heard her strike the piano and dash into a merry boisterous tune ; but in a few minutes the jovial air would be silenced, her fingers would wander absently over the keys, the sounds would cease, and peeping in, I have seen her leaning her

cheek on her elbow, lost in thought, motionless as an image.

A week passed—ten days—a fortnight. I began to wonder how this would end. A woman possessed of Mrs. Ransome's youth and beauty and fortune must soon tire of migrating, like the Primrose family, from the Red Room to the Brown. She would want change; she would want society; and for two years she had had neither.

But certainly she could do nothing until she had heard of her husband and knew his intentions. By-and-by she would get news of him, of course; but of one thing I was confident, she would never consent to live with him again. His desertion had provoked as much gossip as ever a divorce could have done; and her professed objection to scandal she could no longer advance as a reason for not putting an end to her misery by separating from him.

About this time she received a letter from her father, who was living at Boulogne, telling her that he had met Mr. Hastings, one of the curates at Copsford, and had learnt from him the story of the robbery and her husband's disappearance. How was it she had not written

to him of this? Was it true? If so, then he could only suppose that Mr. Ransome's conduct was one more illustration of his eccentricity, and that she did not attach the significance to it which, to judge by Mr. Hastings's account, it deserved. Let her answer him promptly, and set his mind at rest.

She read me this letter in her bedroom, and said that in reply she should tell him not to be uneasy; that he was right in supposing this to be another instance of her husband's capricious character, that he must not pay any heed to gossip, and so forth; Saville had left her a fortnight ago, she expected him home every hour, and then she hoped the queer little mystery of the stolen plate would be explained.

"This is enough to tell for the present, Miss Ivory," she added. "My husband *may* come home—this very day for aught I know. If I were to suggest to my father that the man had probably left me for good, I should have him here at once; and what would happen if my father should be in the house when my husband returned? . . . No, papa must be kept in ignorance for the

present. God knows it will be bitter enough for me to have to tell him the truth when the time comes !”

I could not appreciate this reasoning. Surely she was carrying her obstinate pride a little too far in determining to fight her mad partner to the bitter end, in resolving to take no counsel of those who would have befriended her in the only effectual way that was possible—namely, by removing her out of the reach of her husband, or by confining him in a madhouse. But I did not possess the secret of Mrs. Ransome’s character. She had many points with which I had no sympathy, and many which I could not comprehend. Certainly I never could reconcile her undissembled hatred of her husband with her nervous and passionate dislike to having the truth of her married life known to her friends.

The circumstance I am now about to relate, and which was in an extraordinary degree to complicate the mystery which was already sufficiently puzzling, happened one Tuesday morning, not quite a month after Mr. Ransome had left the house.

I was helping Susan in the bedrooms,

when I was startled by the violent ringing of the hall-bell. My first thought was—Mr. Ransome has returned!

Susan ran downstairs to answer the summons. Five minutes had scarcely elapsed when the girl returned in great haste to tell me I was wanted by mistress, and who did I think was downstairs?—old Mrs. Ransome!

There was nothing surprising in her visit but the impertinence of it. It was natural that she should wish to hear of her son; only, instead of calling she should have written.

Where was the mistress? In the drawing-room. To that room I hastened.

Long before I reached it I heard the old lady's excited cackle. I pushed open the door, and the younger Mrs. Ransome cried out—

“Miss Ivory, I have refused to allow that woman to address me without a witness. Be good enough to draw near, and take particular notice of what she says.”

She was very pale, but quite collected. They both of them stood one on either side the table. The old lady was pale too; but never did I see such a venomous little face as she turned upon me when I entered. She

was pointing with her parasol to her daughter-in-law. In some odd way her black satin gown stood out as though it covered a barrel, and gave her aspect a ludicrous character of small swelling rage.

"Where is my son?" she screamed, flashing upon Mrs. Ransome, and keeping her parasol pointing. "You know! tell me now! tell me now!"

"I do not know," answered Mrs. Ransome.

"Do you mean to say," the little old woman screamed out, "that he's been away a month and never once written to tell you where he is? Do you mean to tell me that you can't put your finger on the exact spot where he is at this moment? Wretch that you are! you have murdered him! Look me in the face and deny it!"

Mrs. Ransome turned as white as a sheet, and involuntarily I made a movement towards her, thinking that she was about to faint. Then my passion boiled up; before Mrs. Ransome could answer, I had turned upon the old woman.

"How *dare* you make such a charge? Are you so mad with temper that you do



not know the horrible words you are uttering?"

"No observations that you can make will in the smallest degree signify to me," she answered, looking at the wall over my head. And then, lowering the key of her voice a full octave, she exclaimed deliberately, "I have come here to see my son. He is not here, and I will find out where he is. His wife knows, and I expect her to answer me."

I crossed over to Mrs. Ransome, out of whom the life seemed to have been shocked, and said in a whisper—

"You had better retire and leave me to manage this lady. She is as mad as her son, and her only purpose is to insult you."

"Ah! You are right in advising her to answer my question!" cried the old lady, shaking her parasol at us. "Have you murdered him? You are capable of it. I can prove you capable of it!"

Mrs. Ransome's simplest and perhaps only course would have been to walk out of the room. Anybody else would have done so. But she never *would* cut short a quarrel by this easiest of processes. She must

answer: she must have the contemptible triumph of the last word. Nobody should drive her out of her own room—which was as bad, to be sure, as being driven out of her own house. Hence the violence of the quarrels between her and her husband. Hence the useless and crazy passage of words that now took place.

She leaned upon the table, her face like a carving in marble, and her tone, manner, and sneer as hard too—all but those wonderful eyes of hers, which shone with sparks of fire in them.

“I have told you,” she said, slowly forcing her words through her pale lips, “that I do not know where your son is. But I pray that the coward and the madman may never come back to me. I pray that he is dead, that I may be *sure* he will never come back to me.”

“You hear her!” exclaimed the old lady, turning to me with her face brimful of malignant triumph. “She says she wishes him dead. She speaks as though she knew he was dead. Bear witness to those words—I shall remember them!”

“Do *you* know where he is?” I said,

looking at her steadfastly. "The malice in your language suggests that you can answer your own question?"

"As I believe in God," she cried, fiercely, "I have not heard of him, nor seen him since that day he accompanied me to Copsford. *She* can tell," pointing to Mrs. Ransome, "if you are ignorant. Let her answer me. Did she not threaten my son's life on the day of his disappearance? In the drawing-room that evening—in this very room—when he asked her to stop the strumming that was making his head ache, did she not turn upon him and cry out that she would have his life?"

I glanced at Mrs. Ransome, who was watching the passionate little woman intently, and paused a moment to give her time to reply, but as she did not immediately speak, I said—

"Your knowledge of that quarrel proves that you must have seen your son since that day. How otherwise should you know of it?"

"Let *her* answer! Is she dumb? Is she conscience-stricken?" She brandished her parasol and repeated, "Did you not threaten

to kill him? look me in the face and deny it if you dare!"

"Yes, I would have killed him! the coward buried his nails in my shoulder! his brutal hand is a pollution—he made me as mad as himself, and I would have killed him!" she replied, quite deliberately, but with the tremor of pent-up passion in her voice.

"Ah!" raved the old lady; "you dare not tell a lie now! wicked as you are, you dare not add to your guilt by a lie! You are known to me—you shall be known to the world soon! Give me back my son," she shrieked.

"Let this end, for God's sake!" I implored Mrs. Ransome. "If you will not order her to leave the house, give me leave to do so."

"Look at her!" continued the old lady. "Do you see how white her face is? do you see how scared she is? Oh, you may cover your terror with sneers, but I can look through such masks—I can see your guilt in your heart! You have a mother to deal with in me who has lost her son; and I say to you, miserable woman that you are, give

him back to me, or I shall hold you guilty of his death and prove you his murderess by your own words."

This reiterated charge affected me in a manner I can scarcely describe. The woman looked crazy enough in all conscience with her dim blue eyes, her bloodless face, her excited gestures, her strange writhing smiles which came and went: but there was also a tremendous earnestness in her manner, if one can possibly conceive anything tremendous in so small a person, that lent an extraordinary significance to her words, and without inclining me for an instant to view her accusation gravely, qualified the intensely disagreeable impression of madness her demeanour was calculated to produce.

I looked at Mrs. Ransome and doubted if she quite understood the nature of the astounding charge her mother-in-law was screeching at her.

"What reason have you," I said, addressing the old lady, "for supposing that Mrs. Ransome has anything to do with your son's disappearance?"

"Has she not threatened to take his life over and over again? has she not threatened

this?" she cried. "Now he is gone—and I ask her where he is—and she will not tell me."

"She cannot. Nobody in this house knows where he is," I answered.

"*She* knows!"

"It is false!" said Mrs. Ransome.

"You know his habits as well as we do," I continued. "He has left the house before now, without giving notice."

"Not for a month at a time!" shrieked the old lady. "Sometimes he has left me for a week, but never without writing and telling me where he was. But this time, though he went to his bedroom—though he was heard to go to it and close the door, when the morning came he was not found in it; he was gone; and he has not returned—and a whole month has passed and he is still missing. *She* knows why this is! *she* can answer me! Give me back my son! give me back my son!"

She beat the air with her parasol and almost howled out her entreaty.

"You have the particulars of his flight at your finger ends," I said. "How do you know that he was found missing in the morning?"

She made no answer to this, but ran to

the bell and pulled it violently; and then turning to Mrs. Ransome cried out—

“You shall be confronted with your servants. I’ll force them to own that you are capable of killing *my* poor boy!”

“Miss Ivory,” said Mrs. Ransome, “show this woman out of the house.”

“I shall confront you with your servants!” cried the little old lady.

Mrs. Ransome went up to her.

“Leave my house,” she said.

“This is your way,” I exclaimed, throwing open the door and motioning to Susan who stood outside to go away.

“Coward!” screamed the old woman through her teeth. “You dare not let me examine your servants! You dare not stand by and hear them answer me! Look at her!” she continued, pointing derisively at her; “see how white she is! miserable creature! You dare not meet your servants before me!”

My first impression, when I saw Mrs. Ransome move, was that she was about to strike her; and I involuntarily threw up my hands to petition her, by that dumb show, not to touch the crazy little thing. But I

misjudged her intention; she grasped the old lady's arm, and as you would swing an infant so did she swing her mother-in-law to the door—into the hall—then to the hall door—then on to the steps. The door banged, and she came back to me.

The whole thing was done before I could have counted ten. The feat involved no particular strength, although passion would have supplied enough; for I don't suppose the old lady weighed more than a girl of eight or nine; but never while I live shall I forget the scene. Compared with her mother-in-law, Mrs. Ransome looked a giantess; could I have seen the faintest twinkle in her eyes I should have caught at it as an excuse to relieve myself of the burst of laughter which internally shook me. She walked into the room with a firm tread and a patch of deep red on either cheek; but she staggered before she reached the table and the colour went out of her face and left it a deadly white. She put out her hand to the table to steady herself, and said in a difficult whisper—

“Is this his reason for leaving the house? is—this the conspiracy—to charge me. . . .”



Her head fell forward, her hand dropped to her side; I ran and caught her, a dead weight, in my arms. She had fainted. I had to lay her at full length on the floor, not having the strength to carry her to the sofa. There was a bottle of toilet-vinegar in the next room; I fetched it, knelt by her and bathed her face. There was no mirth left in me now. I was about to ring for assistance, but reflected that I should be acting more judiciously in not bringing the servants into the room. Even while I was endeavouring to restore the poor lady, the thought that old Mrs. Ransome had got all her information from Mary struck me as a revelation. For a quarter of an hour she remained unconscious and then regained her senses. I led her to the sofa and ran for some brandy, of which I obliged her to take a good sip. This braced her up, she recollected herself, and asked me if old Mrs. Ransome had re-entered the house? I said no, but to make sure went to the hall door and looked out; but of course she was gone; it was hardly to be supposed that she would stand on the doorstep all that time; though her astonishing exit might have

given her an excuse for wanting leisure to adjust her faculties and her apparel.

Mrs. Ransome complaining that her head ached, I drew a chair to the sofa and cooled her forehead with vinegar.

"What do you think of that dreadful woman's visit?" she asked, faintly. "Do you suspect that it is a part of the conspiracy I always believed was my husband's motive for leaving the house?"

"Do not let us discuss the subject yet," I replied. "Take time. Rest yourself awhile. When you are better, we will talk of that crazy woman's visit."

"I must talk of it now. I am well enough. Her hideous accusation seems a dream to me. Can she really think I have *murdered* her son?"

"Not unless she is raving mad. For Heaven's sake do not allow your mind to dwell upon such a preposterous idea. Let us think of her only as regards the mischief she may design you."

"Ah! it comes back to me," she said, slowly. "I see it now. My senses left me when I was about to speak of it. She is an instrument in her son's hands. She plays

her part cheerfully, for she hates me—she hates me unforgivingly—she will never rest until she has revenged herself upon me for my reception of her in this house. How awful. Oh, God! to think of her going about with this charge in her lying mouth. She knows where he is—she must know. He is somewhere concealed, and she has waited a month, and now she has begun her horrible work. Oh, think of it!”

“But what can she do? Who will believe her?” I exclaimed, marking with grief and helpless indignation the expression of misery and suffering on her face. “Let her devise some less ridiculous charge and she might obtain credit. But such an accusation as *this*! She will be laughed at—she will be insulted for her monstrous malice. Have no fear. I would to Heaven I could change places with you. You must oppose the completest insensibility to such absurd fabrications.”

“I cannot cope with her—I must write to my father—I must have his help,” she muttered, closing her eyes, evidently having paid no attention to what I had said.

“Yes,” I cried, eagerly, “you must write

to him to-day. You should have done so before."

"I will write at once; no, not yet," she replied, raising her hand to her forehead. "My head is too confused." She put her feet to the ground, but sank down with her back against the sofa, whispering like one talking in a dream. "Murder him! What can she mean? Base and cruel pair—murder him! Did he leave me for this? What a shocking scheme."

She stared around her with a startled light in her eyes, and once again strove to gain her feet, but staggered and fell back, whispering the incredible thought again and again—"Murder him! did he leave me for this? Murder him!"

I was deeply affected by her sufferings and could find no words to speak. Indeed, the way she repeated the accusation forced me to realize it as I had not before done, and I found myself turning it over and over again in my mind, and wondering at the greatness of the sin that could generate even the bare thought of such a charge. Presently she began to complain of her head; I soaked the handkerchief and laid it on her forehead;

then pulled down the blinds, and saying that I must not permit myself to converse with her any longer, I left the room.

XIII.

Two hours had passed since old Mrs. Ransome was whirled out of the house when, sitting in my room, I was startled by hearing one of the bells just outside in the passage ring violently. I ran out and saw that it was the house-bell and called to Susan to answer the door and deny Mrs. Ransome, who, I believed, was asleep. The girl returned after a short absence, and with a look of consternation exclaimed that old Mrs. Ransome had returned with the Inspector and a constable; that Mary was with them, and that they were all waiting in the outer room; she meant the room dividing the two halls.

Hardly suspecting the import of this visit, I was, nevertheless, so greatly astonished by it, that for some moments I could do no more than stare at Susan.

“Did they ask for me?” I exclaimed.

"No—for mistress; but I thought I'd come and tell you they were here first."

"What on earth does that wretched little woman mean to do now?" I wondered to myself as I went upstairs. The room being small, and the Inspector and the constable being very large, I beheld what I took, for the moment, to be a crowd of persons; but they soon resolved themselves into four only.

The Inspector was seated, drumming impatiently with his fingers on the arm of his chair; behind him stood the constable, a large countryman, whose profoundly provincial aspect no amount of buttons nor officialism of costume could in the smallest degree modify. Mary, shawled and bonneted, was at the outer door, and was excessively pale. Little Mrs. Ransome was holding forth to the Inspector, but held her tongue when she saw me, and honoured me with a smile, the exact counterpart of the indescribable expression I had seen on her son's face that day when I had brought my influence to bear upon him in the dining-room.

"Where's the mistress, young lady?" inquired the Inspector, leaving his chair.

"She is at home. What have you to say to her? I can take your message."

"You're very kind, mum, but on the whole I think I would rather take it myself," replied the Inspector; whereat the constable laughed.

"I will go and tell her you are here."

"You may do that, young lady; but I hope you wont keep me waiting long My time is rather important."

"I must tell her the object of your visit. What is it?" I asked, looking at Mary (who averted her eyes), and then at Mrs. Ransome, who seemed bursting to speak, but kept herself under, it appeared, by holding on tightly to her skirt.

"You may tell her," answered the Inspector, "that I've come to search the house."

"Search the house! what for? What do you expect to find?" I cried.

"Do you see that, Mr. Inspector?" called out the old lady. "Do you see how frightened she is? Mr. Constable, please notice that; and you, Mary."

"Well," rejoined the Inspector, with a great air of condescension, "there's no

reason why you shouldn't be told ; though mind, it's not my business to give *you* information. That lady," pointing with his thumb to Mrs. Ransome, "says that her son, Mr. Ransome——"

"Mr. Saville Ransome," interrupted the old lady, gazing intently at the Inspector.

"What's the difference?" exclaimed the Inspector, contemptuously — "that Mr. Saville Ransome has been missing for a month ; and she's asked me to come and look over the house and see what's to be seen."

"Do you mean to say," I cried, indignantly, "that on the mere strength of a malicious and utterly groundless suspicion, you can take it upon yourself to insult a lady by searching her house? Is it possible that the law permits you to enter a house on the strength of any preposterous charge a person may choose to make against the occupant of it?"

"That's the law. I may enter or break open, on good and sufficient grounds, any house I choose, and search it from top to bottom : which I mean to do here," said the Inspector, angrily. "Instead of standing there and arguing and damaging yourself



with talking about suspicions and the likes of that before you know what the suspicions is about, just be good enough to lead the way to Mrs. Ransome."

"Do you see how frightened she is?" said the old lady, trembling with eagerness. "Mr. Inspector, please notice how pale she is, and you, Mr. Constable, and you, Mary."

"Is it necessary that those two women should intrude upon the mistress?" I asked, taking no notice of Mrs. Ransome.

"They came of their own accord. They said they was coming this way. There's no law that I know of to prevent 'em coming any way they please," answered the Inspector.

"You pretend that it is your duty to search this house. Mrs. Ransome need not be disturbed. I can take you over the house.

"Never you mind what my dooty is," exclaimed the Inspector, wagging a fat forefinger at me. "You attend to your own business, young woman, and do what I tell you, or you'll get yourself into trouble."

Saying which he bestowed a frown upon me and walked into the hall, followed by old

Mrs. Ransome and the constable ; but Mary lingered, whereat the old lady called sweetly, "Come along, my dear ; don't be afraid, Mr. Inspector will prevent her from flying at you."

I pushed past them, walked quickly into the drawing-room, closed the door after me, and approached Mrs. Ransome, who had not moved from the sofa since I had left her, and whose eyes showed that she had been sleeping. I told her hurriedly that the old lady had returned with the Inspector and the girl Mary ; that the man's object was to search the house ; that they were outside, and were waiting to see her. I begged her to be calm, to say as little as she could, and to let the man have his way, since I was sure the old woman counted upon opposition to strengthen the villanous suspicion it was manifestly her object to create.

She started up with an expression of mingled wonderment and horror in her face, and, springing off the sofa, cried out—

"They dare not search my house ! they dare not force themselves upon me ! Tell them to go ! O my God ! how *can* she treat me like this !"

But at this moment the door was pushed open, and the Inspector and the old lady walked in, leaving Mary and the constable at the door.

Mrs. Ransome stared at the constable, who in a peculiar manner brought home the sense of the insult her mother-in-law designed, as though questioning the evidence of her senses; looked at her former servant quickly, then at the old lady, and raised her hand as if to ward or motion them off, with a gesture of singular dignity.

"What is it you want?" she exclaimed.

"My son!" cried the old lady. "Give him back to me! You turned me out of your house just now, but here I am again; and as often as you turn me away so often will you find me returning, until you tell me where my son is or what you have done with him."

"Mr. Inspector," said Mrs. Ransome, earnestly, "I do not know where this woman's son is. I swear that I am ignorant of his reason for leaving this house, whether he is hiding, whether he will return, whether he is dead. This person has a malicious motive for bringing you here. I entreat you

to consider the injury you will do me by beginning a search which I assure you will result in nothing, and which is instigated only that it may give that woman pleasure by degrading 'me.'"

I rejoiced to hear her speak without temper and rationally, and watched the Inspector anxiously to observe the effect of her words upon him.

The old lady interrupted him as he was about to speak.

"You are not to believe her," she shrieked. "She will try to disarm suspicion by soft words, but do they not all do that? do they not all say, we are not guilty! we are not guilty! until the truth is examined into, and then they are found guilty? She would not let me confront her with the other servants just now. She is afraid of the questions I can ask them. But yonder is one who was in her service two years and who will speak the truth. Mary," she vociferated, "have you not heard this woman threaten to kill her husband?"

"Yes," answered Mary boldly, looking around her, "over and over again."

"Weren't you driven out of the house

because she knew you could tell stories about her that would help to bring the truth to light?"

"Yes," replied the girl.

"Liar!" I exclaimed, passionately. "You will not dare repeat that statement on oath!"

"I can't have this noise," said the Inspector, raising his hand. "This lady," he continued, addressing Mrs. Ransome, and pointing to the little woman, whose nostrils were working like the gills of a fish, "came to my office this afternoon and said she had reason to believe that her son had never left this house in the way that had been given out; that she believed he had been murdered, and called upon me to search this building. My dooty is clear. I must act upon her information. I am very sorry, for it's no pleasure to me to disturb gentlefolks with inconvenient calls; but the house must be searched, and if you'll give instructions to that young woman (meaning me) to follow me and my mate with the keys, and lose no time, I shall feel obliged. The sooner this here unpleasant business is disposed of the better for all parties concerned."

A brief silence followed this speech ; the old lady looked eagerly at her daughter-in-law, hoping, with all her malignant little heart in her face, that she would offer opposition. Mrs. Ransome glanced at me piteously—had I dared speak I should have counselled her to let the man have his way. But I was afraid to open my mouth, lest some intemperate word should damage her interests.

The colour had died out of her face long ago ; she was now of a marble whiteness.

“Dare you search this house without reason?” she asked the Inspector in a low voice.

“Attend to her, Mr. Inspector ! she defies you !” cried the old lady.

Mrs. Ransome’s passion exploded like gun-power on which a spark falls.

“Are you men,” she burst out, “that you can suffer yourselves to offer me this insult on the accusation of a wretch like *that* ! See how she takes a cast-off servant of mine into her confidence to further her barbarous end ! Must I endure their presence in my house ? Is this my home, and am I compelled to let those women remain in it and listen to their

atrocious falsehoods? Leave me!" she shrieked, stamping her foot. "If I were a man you would not *dare* take this liberty!"

"Is she not capable of murder? hear her! watch her!" cried the old woman, sputtering her words through her lips and chuckling in sheer enjoyment of her daughter-in-law's rage; and looking with her little body, her long nose, her cadaverous face, her pointing finger, as much like a witch as any portrait of that species of creatures I ever met with. "Give her a knife," she screamed, "and she will stab anyone of us to the heart! Search! search! Mr. Inspector. Don't be afraid of her! Search high and low! In some such a fury as this she has killed my son! Mark me! I am his mother and can read his death in her face!"

Her transports, her gesticulations were much more likely to dismay the Inspector than any passion Mrs. Ransome could exhibit.

"You mustn't object to this search, ma'am," he said to Mrs. Ransome. "It'll do you no good. I can tell you that."

I drew close to her and whispered, "He

is right. For God's sake oppose him no further."

"Has she a right to whisper?" bawled the old lady, pointing to me. "What is she saying? ask her!"

"I am ready to accompany you," I said, turning to the Inspector; "but first I must take leave, on Mrs. Ransome's behalf, to request that these two women quit the house. Your licence does not extend to insisting on their presence. Their insults form no portion of your duty."

"I don't want them," answered the Inspector. "They needn't stop for me. The old lady *would* come and bring the other one along with her because, she said, the young woman knew the house. But I can look about for myself, without their being by to point out the road."

"You hear what the Inspector says?" I exclaimed, going to the door and holding it open. "Leave the house if you please."

"No, no!" cried the old lady, stepping backwards into the middle of the room. "I see the trick. You'd like to blind the Inspector. I'll search as well as he."

"You can't stop if they don't want yer,"



said the Inspector, gruffly. "And as they *don't* want yer, you must go."

"Mary," she shrieked, "tell them what you know—tell them again that you heard that woman threaten my son's life! Tell them that you were turned away because——"

"*Are* you going?" exclaimed the Inspector, angrily. "If you think I've got time to listen to all this talk you're very much mistaken. I'll tell you what it is," he continued, growing more angry, "if the mistress here likes to order the constable to turn you out, she can, and he'll obey."

"Now then, mum," said the constable. "This way, please."

He went out and threw open the hall-door. Mary vanished; the old lady began to expostulate, crying out that we wanted to trick her; that if she chose to remain she could, for she knew the law as well as anybody, and made use of so many crazy observations that I hoped the Inspector's slow intelligence would see what sort of a person he had to deal with in her. All that he did, however, was to stretch forth his hand, intending probably to conduct her to the door;

but she skipped out of his reach, and crying to Mrs. Ransome that her secret was known, and that she'd never rest until she had had her punished, hurried out of the house.

Mrs. Ransome had resumed her seat on the sofa and was looking downwards with a stony face. I told the Inspector that I was ready ; but the absurdity of the whole proceeding struck me as so very great that when we had gained the hall, I asked him whether the house could not be as well searched without me as with me ?

"It's only your acquaintance with the keys that I want, ma'am," he responded ; "we don't wish to break no doors open if we can help ; and I haven't time to be trying of a lot of keys and always finding the right one out last."

One might have thought his time of immense consequence, to hear his repeated references to its value ; but I had reason to believe that there was little to occupy him at Copsford but his toothpick.

"Where will you begin ?" I inquired.

"Atop first and come down regular."

"And what do you suppose you are going to find ?"

"What we shall, and never you mind," he retorted, mingling sarcasm and reproof in a breath very impressively.

I took them upstairs, mourning as I went over the grinding of the carpets under their thick boots. There was no use in offering further protest against this invasion. Undoubtedly the consistency of such an intrusion on the strength of any heavy accusation it might please a malicious or fanciful person to prefer, with the celebrated boast that every Englishman's home is his castle, and Britons never will be slaves, was very remarkable.

I corked up my indignation and looked on whilst the Inspector and the constable peeped and pulled and opened and kicked and shook. They went into every room; they opened every closet and cupboard; they ransacked Mrs. Ransome's wardrobe; they probed into holes, they squinted up chimneys. What on earth were they looking for? I submissively asked the question.

"We're looking," responded the Inspector, "for some sign as will help us to learn that the little old lady's suspicion is right. *That's* what we're looking for. And don't you ever

try to stop officers in the execution of their dooty, or you'll find the law one too many for you, as a good many others have done."

"But what signs do you expect to find?"

"I'll tell you when I come to 'em."

"Do you really think, because Mr. Ransome is missing from this house, that he has been murdered in it?"

"I'd advise you not to say too much, ma'am. It's my dooty to caution yer. You never know what goes in evidence."

Such is the effect of buttons upon the unaccustomed mind, coupled with stolid faces, creaking boots and the spirit of the law as demonstrated by supercilious self-possession and the right to handle, shake, upset, hold up and throw down things which even a thief might regard as in some measure sacred, that I found myself growing nervous, wondering whether anything suggestive *would* be brought to light, and even attaching weight to the very suspicious manner in which the Inspector and the constable went about their work, as though there really must be some reason, some especial reason not to be fathomed by the unofficial under-

standing to justify their elaborate inquiries. Sometimes when they opened a stair-closet I found myself stretching forward imagining that I should see the dead body of Mr. Ransome staring at us from the twilight of the recess. The two men particularly scrutinized Mr. Ransome's bed, and the hangings, and the carpet around it, and the furniture near it—for spots of blood, I think.

In a word, they literally acted upon the suspicion that had been put into their heads by Mrs. Ransome. Her son was missing; his wife was capable of murdering him or of procuring his murder; they must search the house, and so they did, I will do them the justice to say that. They searched every nook and cranny in it, omitting only the drawing-room where Mrs. Ransome was, and, passing lightly over the dining-room, as though the deed could hardly have been committed there, but redoubling their vigilance in my room and throughout the basement.

The Inspector came back to my room after he had searched the scullery and pantry, and said he would like to have a talk with the

servants. Would I please send them in, one at a time? I suppose he had a right to order this, but I could not help wondering how far he would have to go before he should overstep the limits of his legitimate duties. The cook protested against being called upon to answer any questions, on the grounds that she hadn't been engaged for it; but on my representing to her that the sooner the interview was over the sooner the men would be out of the house, she consented to be shut in with the Inspector, whom she regarded as a very high legal functionary, a kind of country Lord Chancellor, who had it in his power to sentence and hang her out of hand if his temper were so disposed.

I don't think he got very much information from either of the servants, for his face looked gloomy and his eyes extraordinarily knowing when he begged me to step that way and tell him what *I* knew.

"All that I know," I replied, "you heard when Mrs. Ransome sent for you about the robbery of the plate."

"I don't mind that," he said, with stupid pomposity. "A month ago isn't to-day."

"I shall tell you nothing more," I exclaimed, bridling with difficulty my rising temper. "You know your privileges better than I do, but it seems to me that you have gone far enough already. You are not a magistrate. You have no right to examine me. You came here to search the house: you have made the search, and what now should prevent you from returning to Copsford?"

"Take care," he cried, holding up his forefinger. "I've cautioned you before against trying to teach me my duty. You'd better tell me what you know. Nothing but aggravation can come of obstinacy."

"What do you want to know?"

"They say you heard a noise that night Mr. Ransome is supposed to have left the house?"

"I did hear a noise."

"What sort of noise?"

I told him.

"Now about the turning of the handle of the door. Which handle was it do you think as was turned?—the husband's or the wife's door?"

"You advised me just now," I answered,

"to be careful of my words, lest they should go in evidence. I don't know what you mean by evidence; but I will take your advice to me to be careful. I am certain you have no right to ask me these questions, and in that persuasion I decline to give you any more answers."

He turned to the constable and said—

"You hear that? That's what is called contoomacy. If a summons *is* granted I shall remember this young woman when the magistrate asks my opinion. Come along, William."

They tramped heavily upstairs, heavily through the hall, heavily out of the house. When they were gone, I went to the drawing-room and found Mrs. Ransome walking up and down, with her head in a listening attitude and her face haggard with the effect of tears.

"Oh, Miss Ivory!" she burst out, running up to me, "do you see his conspiracy now? Did I not tell you on the very morning we discovered he had gone, that he had left the house to revenge himself upon me? Could any one but a demon hit upon such an awful



plan to ruin me! His mother is playing the game for him! What shocking wickedness! Will God permit it to be successful! Will people really believe that he has been murdered?"

She uttered the word with a gasp. I took her by the hand and led her to a chair.

"The Inspector has left," I said, "after ransacking the house. I do not suppose he would dared have done this were he not empowered by his position to do so. But atrocious as his conduct is, I do not regret it. It is sure to create indignation when it is known, and any prejudice against you which that wicked old woman has excited will be forgotten in sympathy."

"But what could she have said to justify the man in such an extreme proceeding?" she cried. "Does she actually charge *me* with the murder of her son?"

"I fear she does. I can scarcely conceive that the Inspector would act in this manner on a small accusation. But is it not monstrous that such a man as that should be privileged to use his own judgment on the

first malicious fabrication that is reported to him? He examined the servants, and tried to examine me; but I would not answer his questions. He *cannot* have authority for acting as he has done."

"If he can believe her," she moaned, burying her face in her hands, "will not others? They have long tried to degrade me—they have done it at last! My house has been searched—it will go forth to the world that my house has been searched, and that I am accused of murdering my husband! My God! what a scheme to enter his head! How can I prove my innocence? He may keep away from me for years and years, and remain hidden, and then die and no one of all the world who believes in my guilt hear of his death! How can I clear myself? What am I to do? I shall go mad?"

She sprang from her chair with her hands clenched, her head thrown back, her eyes with a wild hunted expression in them. Her action, her attitude, her look was madness itself.

"You must be calm," I implored. "Remember the character of the persons you have to deal with. They must be

matched with their own cunning or they will triumph. I cannot advise you yet—I must have time to think. But it is imperative that you should write to your father and urge him to come to you without a moment's delay."

"I have done so," she answered. "There is the letter."

She pointed in a bewildered manner to the table.

"I will post it at once," I continued. "They have reckoned on your defencelessness. Long ago I saw that you could not cope single-handed with Mr. Ransome. There is no limit to his wicked ingenuity, and one had need to be as wicked, and as mad too, as he is, to match him."

"Will they not believe me when I tell them that this is a conspiracy between the mother and son?" she exclaimed, wildly, eagerly staring at me. "Will they think for a moment that I am capable of taking his life?"

"No," I answered, decidedly; "do not dream of such a thing. That woman has done her worst in getting your house searched. But she has overreached herself.

The very magnitude of her accusation will defeat its purpose."

"But the Inspector believes it, or he imagines me capable of conniving at Mr. Ransome's death, or would he *dare* search my house?" she cried.

"His belief will not be the belief of others. He is a pompous foolish man, and would act, I daresay, on any information that should be given him. No doubt he is empowered to enter a house and search it if he thinks proper; but, in this case, he may have exceeded his duty; your father will find that out, and will know the remedy against such insolence."

"That woman has done all she can," cried the poor lady, weeping bitterly. "She has cast a horrible suspicion upon me, and her son will take care that I shall not clear myself from it."

She hid her face in her hands and sobbed piteously. It was imperative, however, that the letter to her father should be posted at once: for the postbags were made up twice a day at Copsford, and in those primitive times, or at all events in that primitive town, it was necessary to post a letter some time

before the departure of the cart to insure its despatch.

"Does this letter," I asked, "urge your father to come at once?"

"Yes," she sobbed.

Without another word I hurried out of the room.





## THE COLONEL'S STORY

*(Continued).*

### I.

**T**AKE the liberty of interrupting Miss Avory's story, in order to relate myself this portion of the narrative, the particulars of which I am better acquainted with than she.

After quitting Gardenhurst, I had fixed upon Boulogne as a place of residence. My chief object in leaving England was, to have the sea between Phœbe and myself, that I might have a reasonable excuse for seldom visiting her. My own common sense persuaded me, that my opposition to her marriage would hardly have endeared me to her husband. I felt that I should always be an unwelcome visitor to *him*, and having no opinion of his temper or generosity, I was determined that no intrusions of mine, at least, should give him an excuse for quarrelling with his wife.

I heard from her frequently during the first eighteen months of her married life. There was never a syllable in any of her letters to lead me to suppose that she was unhappy. But I took notice that after a little, she entirely omitted her husband's name from her correspondence. I regarded her silence on this point as ominous, but it was negative: it might be owing to other causes than quarrels or unhappiness; she might conceive that I took no interest in him and his doings, and certainly there was a forced manner in such references as I made to him which could not mislead her in this respect.

At last I received a letter, in which she begged me to spend a few weeks at Gardenhurst. I should have been glad to excuse myself, for I had strong misgivings that my presence might create dissension, and as I had no reason to suppose that she was unhappy, I was for letting well alone.

My longing to see her, however, triumphed over my hesitation, and within a week from the date of her invitation, I was at Gardenhurst.

I will not dwell upon this part of my story further than to say, that I was not in

the house a day before I discovered that she was unhappy. I questioned her, but her answers were evasive. She confessed that her husband's caprices troubled her, but more than this she would not admit. She was looking well, and, in my opinion, had gained in beauty since her marriage. But her old pride and obstinacy were still with her, and were now sharply-cut features of her character. These, I saw easily enough, were the secret of her reticence. She had learned her mistake in opposing my judgment, but would not confess her discovery ; nay, rather than endure the mortification of such an admission, she would have me believe she was happy. On the whole, I considered her wise to make the best of what was unalterable. The disclosure of her sorrow would only have grieved me, without putting it into my power to help her.

I have observed that, in Miss Ivory's narrative, it was implied or stated to her that Mr. Ransome had made me very unwelcome. This was an exaggeration that must be attributed to the heat or prejudice of the accusing person. I cannot pretend that Mr. Ransome received me cordially ; but



he met and treated me throughout my stay in the house with as much politeness as I had reason to expect, and with more than I had hoped to receive. Sometimes I thought he was afraid of me. His behaviour when with his wife and me in a room would corroborate the suspicion of fear which was suggested by his resolute shunning of me if we met in the grounds. I saw very little of him; but I witnessed nothing in his manner or conversation to cause me to imagine that, if he ever had been insane, which I had once solemnly believed, his insanity had gained ground since I last met him.

Two or three days passed without any quarrels taking place, and then a quarrel that shocked me exceedingly occurred at the luncheon-table. There was more of sarcasm and sneering contempt than of rage in Mr. Ransome's language; but my daughter's behaviour was pure passion. She had provoked him in this instance by some unfortunate reference to his mother. Though her words were very intemperate, I could not have divined that the hate they expressed towards him was positively her only senti-

ment. Anger made her bitter, and she might not have meant what she said. I told her I could not submit to witness such scenes; and threatened, if they were repeated, to leave the house. I blamed her for provoking him; but by this time her passion was expended; she looked at me attentively, but offered no defence for her conduct.

My threat of quitting the house, however, did no good. A day or two afterwards they quarrelled in my presence again; and again I considered Phoebe to blame; for, though a good-tempered man, perhaps, would not have noticed the remark that had fired Mr. Ransome, yet there had been something singularly aggressive in her manner, in the look she gave him, in her short, hard laugh, in the quick shrug, and insolent turning away of the head.

She had kept me so entirely in ignorance of her secret life with her husband, that it argued no want of perception on my part not to conceive that in these quarrels she was retaliating on him for cruel insults and even barbarous behaviour to her when they were alone. To me he maintained his doubtful attitude of frightened courtesy, and in my

presence never behaved to his wife offensively nor said one word, up to the time of quarrelling, which would have justified me in offering a protest. Even when their quarrels were at the highest, his manner was smooth, his language unimpassioned compared to hers; but he would turn very pale, the sinister gleam I remembered shone in his eyes, and his retorts and charges would not be the more reassuring because they were spoken deliberately and even with difficulty.

I tried to draw Phœbe into a confession, but she was on her guard. She was not unhappy—no! Saville was capricious and angered her; but she dared say most of their quarrels were owing to her own temper. She did not like little Mrs. Ransome—she admitted that; and said that many of the quarrels between her and her husband were owing to that woman's interference. How did she interfere? I asked. Oh, when she came to the house she ordered the servants as though she were their mistress.

"I am mistress here, am I not, papa?" she exclaimed, with the old obstinate look in her face. "You gave me this house, and the

money I spend here is my own. Whilst I live no one shall dispute my right to regard myself as mistress."

I endeavoured to point out that she could be mistress without insisting too strongly on her rights; that there was something ungracious in her emphatic assumption of privileges, seeing that her husband and his mother well knew that the property was hers; that the best-natured man in the world might object to play second-fiddle in his home, and that, indeed, her fortune was as much her husband's as hers; and that the settlement of it upon her did not make it the less his, but only prohibited him from touching the capital.

She did not press the argument, and soon contrived to change the subject.

I noticed several bad signs during this visit, all concurring to make me uneasy, though I never could get her to be frank with me. They occupied separate bedrooms; they had no visitors to the house; Phœbe was constantly out, and sometimes remained away all day. Had I chosen, I might have obtained enough information from the servants to satisfy me that my

daughter was leading an unhappy life; but not even my child's interests could force me to stoop to so mean and unfair a device. What she refused to tell me herself I would not hear from a menial's lips. My visit lasted scarcely a fortnight, and when, offended at last by quarrels which were conducted on my daughter's side with a heat which I considered inexcusable, I quitted the house, I was as ignorant of the truth to which one word from her would have opened my eyes, as I was at the moment of entering it.

Six months or thereabouts had elapsed since I returned to Boulogne when I happened to meet Mr. Hastings, who had been appointed curate at Copsford a short time before my daughter's marriage. He remembered me and crossed the street, glad to meet with a familiar face in a strange town. We walked together, and he told me about the robbery at Gardenhurst, and the strange disappearance of Mr. Ransome. I was amazed by this piece of news; for I had heard but a few days before from Phœbe and she had not mentioned the circumstance. Mr. Hastings was equally amazed by my

ignorance. He told me that this was the one topic now at Copsford ; that all sorts of surmises were current ; that some were for having that Mr. Ransome had been murdered by his footman, and others that the footman had been murdered by Mr. Ransome. He further added (very courteously) that regret was felt by Mrs. Ransome's well-wishers that she had not taken steps to discover the truth, since her indifference both as to the robbery and her husband's disappearance had been much commented on and given rise to many idle rumours and prejudices. He said that had he been less a stranger to my daughter he would have called upon her and advised her to place the matter in the hands of the police, which, however profitless the step might be so far as regarded the solution of the mystery, would silence gossip and rescue her from the charge of heartlessness.

I hastened home and wrote to Phœbe, mentioning the news I had received from Mr. Hastings, and asking her to explain her silence. I had to wait some days for her answer. When at last I received her letter, it was to the effect that I must not allow

myself to be made uneasy by any reports that reached me ; that this disappearance of Mr. Ransome was only another illustration of his capricious character, and that it was quite likely he would have returned before I received her letter. The robbery she said was the real mystery ; for she could not guess whether the footman had actually stolen the plate on his own account or whether he had acted on the instructions of Mr. Ransome. When her husband came home he would clear up this difficulty, and she would hazard no conjecture until he had returned.

I had to be satisfied with this answer, which was no explanation. It was plain that she must think her husband very mad, if she could suppose he would order his man to rob his house. To my common sense, it seemed that she was bound to assume that the footman had stolen the plate ; and I could not understand why she hesitated to start the police after him. There was a reserve in the tone of her letter which made me fancy that the so-called mystery was no mystery to her. It seemed very idle to pretend that her husband could con-

nive at this robbery. I knew very well what plate they had, and if it were all gone, then the loss would amount to not less than seven or eight hundred pounds.

However, I forebore troubling my mind with conjectures, living in daily expectation of receiving a letter that should explain the whole affair. Meanwhile, I frequently met Mr. Hastings, and from him gathered, by very slow degrees, the estimation in which my daughter and her husband were held at Copsford. I was greatly concerned to find that their habit of quarrelling was well known, that in consequence of Mr. Ransome's eccentric and often insolent reception of his wife's friends, few, if any, persons visited the house, and that it was generally understood he was insane, though various degrees of insanity were ascribed to him.

All this was extremely mortifying for me to hear. I have before written, that owing to the loss of my wife, I had withdrawn from society, and preserved the acquaintance of but few people; but I believed I had left a name that was thoroughly respected throughout the neighbourhood, and I cannot describe the distress and annoyance



with which I heard that my daughter and Mr. Ransome were incessantly creating gossip, and that this last vagary of Mr. Ransome had brought upon his wife as much scandal, had excited as many rumours, and generated as much prejudice, as if she had very seriously committed herself.

Three weeks passed before I again heard from Phœbe; and then one afternoon, on returning to my lodgings, I found the following letter from her:—

“DEAREST PAPA.—For God’s sake come to me at once. I am the victim of a horrible plot, and am helpless whilst you are from me. I cannot write more now. An unendurable insult has been offered me. On receipt of this letter leave Boulogne.”

The handwriting was an agitated scrawl, and the wild appearance of the letter was completed by the rough way in which it had been folded and crammed into the envelope. You may conceive I was greatly agitated by this letter. The hasty, unsatisfactory words offered scope to all kinds of conjectures. My ruling impression was, that she had violently quarrelled with her

husband. I imagined that he had returned home, assigned some discreditable motive for his disappearance, and that she had been driven into a passion by this confession, and dashed off this letter to me when her temper was at its height.

I had to wait until the morrow to cross the Channel. The packet started at nine, and after being blown about for nearly six hours, we made Dover. I posted to Canterbury, where I caught the coach to London; slept at Southwark that night, early next morning booked myself for Copsford, and reached that town at four o'clock in the afternoon, three days after the receipt of my daughter's letter.

I engaged a bedroom at one of the chief inns at Copsford, where I left my portman-teau, and hiring a fly, was driven over to Gardenhurst. The familiar scenery through which I passed, amid which I had spent so many years of my life, recalled many associations mournful and happy. I remembered how I had climbed yonder hill; how, as a boy, I had fished in the silver trout-stream in that dark-green valley down there; how often I had traversed this road I was now journey-

ing along, with my wife by my side ; how in later days Phœbe had been my one dear companion. I thought of her folly in marrying a man of whom she had known so little, but in whom I had witnessed characteristics which furnished me with but poor promise of my girl's happiness with him. As I approached the house my agitation increased. My ignorance of the nature of my daughter's need of me rendered my imagination painfully active, and I felt as if I should not have the courage to meet her.

I alighted at the gate and walked along the avenue. My hand trembled as I raised it to the knocker. I was mastered by I know not what indefinable dread, and waited with miserable anxiety for my summons to be answered. The gloom of the evening had gathered under the avenue ; but away down on my left the grounds were shining in the light of the sinking sun, and the rooks were noisy in the soft dark clouds of trees at the bottom.

The door was opened by a plainly-dressed, but neat, kindly-faced woman, who might have been twenty or forty, for she had an odd look of youth and middle-age in her

face. Her hair was brown and brushed smoothly over her forehead; her eyes were grey, clear, and singularly honest and penetrating; her complexion pale. She started on seeing me, and before I could speak, exclaimed—

“You are Colonel Kilmain, sir?”

“Yes. Is my daughter at home?”

“Yes, sir; she will be very glad to see you,” she said. “She is in the drawing-room. Have you no luggage?”

“I have left my portmanteau at Copsford. Mr. Ransome has not returned?”

“No, sir.”

“Does Mrs. Ransome expect me?”

“Yes, sir; but she was afraid you would not arrive before to-morrow.”

She closed the hall door and I walked to the drawing-room, first knocking and then throwing open the door. Phoebe was seated at the table in a most listless attitude, mechanically turning the leaves of a book with her eyes directed at the window. She looked around, saw me, sprang from the chair, and in a moment was sobbing upon my breast.

“My darling,” I exclaimed, kissing her

and leading her tenderly to the sofa, "you see I have lost no time in coming to you. You have caused me great anxiety, for your letter was very hurried and short, and has terribly exercised my imagination. What is the plot, Phoebe? What has your husband been doing?"

"Oh, papa, I cannot tell you yet," she answered, holding my hands with a clinging attitude and pressing against me in a way strangely suggestive of the need of shelter and protection. "You are tired—you must rest yourself awhile. You are not prepared to hear the story yet. I will ring for some tea—that will refresh you."

"No, my child, I want nothing," I said. "Tell me everything at once. I have been in suspense long enough—begin now, Phoebe."

She breathed quickly and a look of wild fear came into her eyes. Her face was very thin, the hollows under her eyes dark, and there was an expression of passionate distress and weariness, and lines of care that made her older-looking by ten years.

I repeated again eagerly my wish to hear the truth at once. Her hands trembled in

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mine and I felt them turn cold and clammy. Then she began her recital. She told me how on a certain morning, above a month ago, her husband and the footman, Maddox, were found missing; how the housekeeper, Miss Ivory, had found the plate-safe empty; how the Inspector had been summoned, and how, after he was come, she regretted having sent for him when she considered that the disappearance of the two men might be a scheme of her husband's, and that it was impossible for her to explain her suspicions to the Inspector without entering into family secrets which her pride abhorred the thought of making public; how she suffered the matter to rest in the full persuasion that Maddox had acted in concert with Mr. Ransome, and that the latter would return any day; when, if Maddox was really guilty of stealing the plate, the police could be started in pursuit of him; how, but a few days ago, Mrs. Ransome had entered the house and denounced her as her husband's murderess; how shortly after she had been turned out, she came back with the Inspector, a constable, and a dismissed servant who declared that she had frequently heard her late mis-

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treass threaten to kill Mr. Ransome ; how the Inspector and the constable had searched the house, implying by the act that they deemed her capable of the crime imputed to her ; and how, at that very time of speaking, she was actually lying under the suspicion of having murdered her husband with her own hands, or of having connived at his death by the hands of another.

Such was her story to me.

I listened to it without a word, too astounded to utter even an exclamation.

When she had made an end I looked at her. As I hope to live, I believed at that moment that she was mad, that her whole story, consistently related as it had been, was a hideous delusion under which she was then labouring.

"Do you mean to tell me, Phœbe," I exclaimed, "that the Inspector searched this house on the information of Mr. Ransome's mother, for the purpose of finding proof of your guilt!"

"Yes, papa. Miss Ivory will bear witness. Let her join us. She has been my only friend!"

"Stay!" I cried, restraining her. "Answer

me first some questions, and then we will call her. What kind of life have you led with this man who has deserted you?"

"As I believe in God," she answered, wringing her hands, "the most miserable life that ever woman led in this world."

"And you never told me!"

"He has driven me mad," she continued, rocking herself to and fro, "with wild and dreadful insults. He has struck me with his fist. He has buried his fingers in the flesh of my arm, and left marks there which have lasted for days! He has cursed and spat upon me! Ruffian! coward that he is! he has tried to drive me mad—and he has done it, I think! for this last act of his has forced a weight like burning iron into my head, and I have scarcely closed my eyes in sleep for six days."

"My God!" I cried, grasping her arm in the passion that mastered me. "Why did you not tell me this before? Why have you allowed his madness to play itself into this last atrocious act?"

She made no answer, and continued rocking herself to and fro, moaning as though her heart would break.

"Was it your obstinate pride that kept



you silent?" I continued. "Am I so great an enemy to you that you will never take me into your councils until it is too late? Would real pride suffer itself to be trampled upon and crushed whilst it had a voice to lift up to summon the help which a single syllable would have obtained? And now what has come of it all? The deadliest suspicion is upon us! Your husband's villany has made this house accurst! Though all be made clear as the daylight, yet the suspicion will always haunt us, the foul memory will never depart! The ruffian has done his work! Why have I been spared to witness this awful disgrace?"

I paced the room in a frenzy. My pride had received a terrible wound, and the torment of it drove me wild. I grasped the whole situation as though I had been an actor in it from the beginning. *Now* I understood the significance of those whispers to which Mr. Hastings had referred. My daughter was terrified by my passion, and stared at me with wide open eyes.

"Why did you not tell me that your husband was a villain? Why did you not tell me? long ago I would have taken you from him!" I cried; and I repeated these excla-

mations again and again, feeling the blood in my head, and clutching at my collar, which seemed to strangle me, until, breathless and exhausted, I sank into a chair.

I felt her hand upon my shoulder—I motioned her away.

“Not yet,” I muttered. “Give me time! this is an awful blow. I should not have believed I could bear it and live.”

Then I looked at her. There was something heartrending in the misery and pain expressed in her face.

“Oh Phœbe!” I cried, extending my arms, “this is hard—hard upon us both!”

She fell at my feet. I threw my arms around her neck and burst into tears. But for that relief I believe I should have died.

She was shocked by my tears, for she had never seen me weep before. She sobbed with dry eyes, grovelling at my feet and crying that her punishment had been a piteous one, and begging me to look at her kindly, for that I was her only friend, and if I abandoned her she would kill herself.

I pressed my lips to her forehead and raised her.

“My weakness has passed, Phœbe. God knows you have suffered enough. I should

not have been angry with you. But how could I hear you tell me of your husband's behaviour and remain calm? Was he ill-treating you six months ago?—if so he hid his villany well, for how often did I tell you that you were the transgressor in the quarrels between you! how little did I guess the provocation he gave you in secret! You have said that Miss Ivory has been a friend to you. Ring the bell and let her join us. She will be cooler than you, and tell me clearly all that I must know without delay."

"Papa, you are tired—you have travelled a long distance—rest yourself awhile."

I had assumed a calm for her sake, but my agitation was so great that it needed the utmost effort of my will to enable me to speak quietly. I rang the bell myself, and paced the room whilst I endeavoured to realize our position and make myself master of the details of Mr. Ransome's plot against his wife—for a plot, on the assurance of Phoebe, I considered it. She watched me wistfully; but without the fear that had hitherto made her face almost pitiful to see.

Miss Ivory probably guessed that the summons was for her, for she answered it

herself. There was something so quiet and steady in her manner and appearance that the mere sight of her seemed to soothe my agitation. Though her features were irregular, yet there was so much intellect and delicacy and firmness expressed in her pale face that one would never dream of noticing that she was not pretty. She was as much a lady as any one I ever met, with her self-possessed manner, her calm gaze, her gentle, but not timid air. At any other time I might have wondered to find her occupying the lowly position of housekeeper, but I had other things to think of.

I begged her to be seated. She closed the door and took a chair facing one of the windows, perhaps that I might see her face and know that she spoke the truth in her answers.

"I have just heard from my daughter," I said, "the story of the wrong her husband and his mother have done her. Do you think with her that this is a conspiracy on Mr. Ransome's part, and that his mother is helping him to carry it out?"

"I cannot make up my mind to take that view, sir," she answered. "I have no doubt that Mr. Ransome's insanity is great enough

to account for everything ; but there is one feature in this affair so purposeless as respects any issue Mr. Ransome may contemplate that, until I can find a reason for it, I cannot persuade myself to regard Mr. Ransome's disappearance as a conspiracy. I refer to the robbery of the plate. He could have no object in taking the plate himself or in getting the footman to take it."

"But Miss Avory will not consider that Mr. Ransome is mad," exclaimed Phœbe, petulantly.

"Miss Avory does, my dear," I answered ; "I think her views very sound. The same thought occurred to me when I read your letter. The fact of your husband and the footman leaving the house on the same night proves only a coincidence. Had there been no robbery committed one might assume that they had gone off together ; but the missing plate convicts one of them of theft. Your husband could have no motive in taking it ; he would not burden himself with it ; he could find no use for it. Hence Maddox must have stolen it ; and the robbery, in my opinion, proves the two men to have acted independently of each other."

"I must tell you, sir," said Miss Ivory, "that I was talking to some people of the name of Campion, a day or two ago, and they assured me, from what they had heard, that Mrs. Ransome is perfectly sincere in her belief that her son has been murdered. Monstrous as her theory is, since it involves an abominable charge against the members of this household, yet it is well to know that she is conscientious in professing it, because it proves that she is not in league with her son."

"But how do you know she speaks the truth?" cried Phœbe. "Did she not make Mary tell an infamous lie by suggesting that she had been discharged because she knew too much? I will never believe," she exclaimed, passionately, "that she and her son are not in a conspiracy against me. She brought the Inspector to my house that she might degrade me, and create a suspicion against me in people's minds; and is the word of a wretch who could act like this to be taken? She wants to revenge herself; and there is no lie she would not tell to disgrace and ruin me."

"What have you done to make her revengeful?" I asked.

"When she visited us, she would act as if she were mistress here, take my authority out of my hands, and set the servants against me; besides aggravating the bitterness that already existed between my husband and me. I determined to show her and everybody else that I was mistress, that this was my house, and that no orders but mine should be obeyed. At her last visit I gave her the use of two rooms and refused to let her occupy the others. This is her reason for hating me."

"You did not tell me this before," I exclaimed.

"Well, papa, it is true; and on the same day of her arrival she left us, and that night her son disappeared. Do I not prove the conspiracy by showing you why it should exist?"

"Did she leave you voluntarily?"

"No. Miss Ivory frightened Mr. Ransome by threatening him with a madhouse. She found that she had power over him and used her influence to oblige him to take his

mother away. This was a defeat she could not forgive. "Oh!" she cried, impetuously, "it is blinding one's eyes to the truth to pretend that all this isn't a conspiracy. I see through it plainly enough."

"Are you sure he was frightened of you, Miss Ivory?" I said; "or do you think his fear was feigned and a stratagem of his madness? He might have wished his mother to go and pretend that he was afraid of you, as an excuse to remove her."

"No, sir; he was afraid of me; I am sure of that. He ruled his mother and would not require any excuse to request her to leave."

"You actually threatened him with a madhouse?"

"Not actually; he confessed his horror of the thought, and I worked upon his fear by implication in order to get him to remove his mother."

I recalled his manner to me six months before; how he had shunned me, how he had avoided my gaze. I had often felt that he was afraid of me. A strange idea seized me.

"Do you think, Miss Ivory, he ran away *because* he was frightened of you and dreaded



that your threats of a madhouse might really be carried out?"

She was silent and bent her eyes down thoughtfully.

"Consider," I went on; "he would understand that you knew of his behaviour to my daughter; he might believe that having guessed he was mad, you would acquaint me with your discovery of his madness and of the ill-usage my daughter was subjected to; and not doubting how I should act, he ran away—a madman's fear acting upon him."

"That might be his reason," she replied, drawing a long breath.

"He knew," I exclaimed, with excitement, "as certainly as that he lived, that had I guessed he was the madman I have found him out to be, I would have saved my daughter from his brutality by using the only remedy I am permitted against him. He is fit only for a madhouse, and there I would have had him lodged. Phœbe, can this have been his reason for leaving you?"

"No! his reason is to disgrace me. He has done so, through his mother!"

Her answer recalled me from my speculations to the sense of our present position.

"What is thought of Mrs. Ransome's

charge against my daughter, Miss Ivory? Is it credited?" I exclaimed.

"I must tell you the truth," sir, she answered. "There is much gossip about it, and until the old lady's accusation is disproved, people will continue wondering and talking."

"Disproved!" I cried; "what shape does the accusation take? Does she actually charge my daughter with murdering Mr. Ransome?"

"She declares it is her full persuasion that her son is dead, that your daughter knows he is dead, and can tell, if she chooses, how he came by his death."

"She called me murderess to my face, papa," Phoebe shrieked, starting up and holding her clasped hands out before her.

"But," I burst out, "how can she found a charge of this kind on the mere disappearance of her son, knowing that it was his habit to leave her without hinting his intention? Are they all crazy at Copsford that they listen to this woman's stuff!"

"She made the Inspector search the house expressly that people should suspect me," moaned Phoebe.

"A serious mistake was made in the first

instance," said Miss Ivory, "by Mrs. Ransome omitting to give instructions to the Inspector to follow Maddox. People are dwelling upon that. They think something is hidden behind this indifference to the robbery."

"Yes," I answered; "I see how this indifference might be misconstrued. Why, Phoebe, did you not treat the matter as a robbery? Of course people wonder that you should not take a single step to recover your property."

"How could I explain the truth to the Inspector," said Phoebe, beginning to sob; "I believed then, as I believe now, that the removal of the plate was a part of the conspiracy—perhaps to account for Maddox's disappearance—to throw us off our guard—as the apparent robbery of Mr. Ransome's room was designed to do; and I would not play into the coward's hands by exposing my secrets to strangers; I thought he would come back; every day I expected him. *Then* I should have found out the truth about Maddox."

"Where is Mrs. Ransome living? do you know, Miss Ivory?" I asked.

"She has a lodging in Dane Street, I believe. I heard last night that she was ill. The news came by a friend of the cook, who also added another startling piece of gossip."

"What was that?" I exclaimed, seeing her look earnestly towards Phœbe.

She hesitated some moments, and then answered—

"The day after the Inspector searched the house, Mrs. Ransome applied for a summons against your daughter ; but her application was refused by the magistrates."

"A summons to bring my child before the bench on the charge of murder," I cried.

"Yes, sir. I beg your pardon, madam," Miss Avory said, addressing my daughter, "for not having told you this before. I thought it best to wait until Colonel Kilmain had arrived. She applied in person for the summons, and on its being refused, fell into a passion and called on all present to take notice that the law refused to help her to bring her son's murderess to justice. A few such scenes, sir, would do good, by convincing people that she was mad."

"But is she not known to be mad?" I exclaimed, almost paralysed by the hideous and overwhelming pertinacity the old woman had exhibited.

"I am afraid not—at least by the majority," she replied. "Some sympathy is felt for her. She is a poor heartbroken mother, they say, mourning the loss of her son: the law ought to help her to find him. She is now ill, seriously ill, it is rumoured; and whether her illness is feigned or not, the report is sure to increase the sympathy she has excited."

I felt myself for the moment utterly helpless in the face of the astounding situation in which my daughter was placed. It was now half-past seven; the evening was fast drawing in, and the room was so gloomy that I could barely see the faces of my companions. For seven or eight hours no food had passed my lips: I felt faint but had no appetite. I asked Miss Avory to get me some brandy-and-water, and she hurried away, and after a short absence brought, in addition to what I had requested, some sandwiches and biscuits. While she was gone not a word had passed between my

daughter and me. She was terrified, I think, by the misery she had brought upon me: and I was too agitated by conflicting passions to utter a syllable. I forced myself to eat and drink, and then jumping up announced my intention to go at once to Mrs. Ransome.

“I *must* see her,” I exclaimed, “though she be dying; I must extort the truth from her, and force her to own that either this is a conspiracy to ruin you, or that she actually believes her scoundrel son has been murdered in this house.”

I heard Phœbe addressing me in beseeching language, but I paid no heed to her; with a feeling as of a fever raging in my blood, I hurried into the hall, seized my hat, and in a few moments was walking impetuously towards Copsford.

## II.

The evening was fine, the sun had set, and in the east the sky was heavy with stars. The cool air fanned my heated face as I walked, but I saw no more of the rich and glorious landscape that lay around me,

with its wreathed hills and black valleys, than had I been in a cell.

The blow that had been dealt me was a stunning one. The significance of the position my daughter had placed both of us in, by her fatal choice of a madman for a husband, grew deep and appalling, now that I was alone, and could give my whole mind to it. From any charge, however insignificant, so that it gave provocation to gossip, my pride would have recoiled with horror ; but *this!* . . .

In half an hour's time I had reached Copsford. I entered the High Street with a dread of being recognised, and, poorly lighted as the thoroughfare was, shrank as I advanced close against the shops, and passed forward hastily, keeping my face bent downwards. The little town was as familiar to me as my hand. I reached Dane Street, and looking about me a moment, entered a chemist's shop, and asked the man behind the counter if he knew where Mrs. Ransome lived.

"Why, Colonel Kilmain," he exclaimed, with a smile, "you ought to know where Gardenhurst is, sir."

"I don't mean my daughter," I answered, foolishly dismayed by finding myself known; "there is another Mrs. Ransome who lodges somewhere in this street."

"Oh, to be sure, sir. I beg pardon. I was thinking of Mrs. Ransome of Gardenhurst. The other Mrs. Ransome—she's your daughter's mother-in-law, I believe, sir—lives at Number Three, a private house, at the bottom of this side. They say she wont live, sir. I've been supplying her with a deal of medicine for the last few days, one way and another. That's a bad job about her son. Oh, I beg your pardon," he exclaimed, colouring to the roots of his hair.

"What about her son?"

"Oh—really—I forgot who I was talking to, sir. Number Three, sir—last house but one on this side."

"It is reported that her son is murdered, isn't it?"

"Why, yes, so they say, sir. I am quite vexed with myself for forgetting."

"Murdered by whom?"

"I'd rather not talk of it, sir," he answered, with a great air of confusion. "It's not a pleasant subject," he added, appealingly.



"But you can answer my question."

"If I *must* say it," he exclaimed, forcing his words out with reluctance, "they report that he was murdered up at his own house."

"And are you fool enough to believe this report?"

"I? Lord bless you, sir! I've got other things to think of."

I wheeled round and walked out of the shop. Better for me, perhaps, had I always acted so.

I reached the house to which the chemist had directed me and knocked. It was an old but clean house, with black gleaming windows on a level with the wall, and a door decorated with a brass knocker and handle. I stepped backwards, after I had knocked, and looked up. A light shone upon the second-floor windows, and the shadow of a figure walking in the room moved upon the blinds. In a short time the door was opened, and a thin ghostly-looking man in a sleeved waistcoat stood forth, leaving a candle burning on a table in the passage.

"Does Mrs. Ransome live here?" I inquired.

The man looked attentively at me for some moments, and then answered in a voice resembling a raven's—

“No.”

“Where does she live? I was informed that she was in lodgings at Number Three.”

“So she were,” croaked the man, “and this is Number Three. But she don't live nowheres now. She's dead.”

He wagged his head slowly from side to side, struck his nose with his finger, and fell back a step, repeating, “Cos she's dead.”

“Dead!” I exclaimed. “When did she die?”

“As the clock was a striking twelve,” he answered. “My wife's attending of the corpse now. You can't see it.”

The strange suspicion that this might be a trick of the old lady's, though God knows for what end, was put into my head by the man's words. Unfortunately, I could not see his face clearly, for the candle behind him flickered in my eyes, and the street which he confronted was quite dark.

“Can you tell me the name of the doctor who attended her?” I said.

"Mr. Eastwell."

"Thank you."

I knew Mr. Eastwell by sight, and where he lived. I turned away, and the ghostly-looking man shut the door. I crossed the street, and looked at the windows where the light was. The shadow moved restlessly upon the blinds. Was she really dead? If so, her death must have been sudden. How came it that the news had not been brought to Gardenhurst? Those who attended her would be sure to know that Phoebe was her daughter-in-law, and they would naturally look to her for instructions with respect to the disposal of the body.

This reflection increased my suspicion. I walked hurriedly into the High Street where Mr. Eastwell lived, trying to imagine in what manner the supposed death of the old lady would strengthen the plot of which Phoebe declared herself the victim. On my arrival at the surgeon's house the door was opened by a page, who took me for a patient and led me to a small, close-smelling room, with a table on one side covered with glass bottles and the walls hung with anatomical drawings.

Mr. Eastwell, probably sharing the impression of his page, kept me waiting some time.

He was a fat young man, in spectacles. He brought into the room with him a strong smell of tobacco, and catching sight of me, suffered the stereotyped gravity to melt out of his face, whilst he exclaimed—

“I have the honour of seeing Colonel Kilmain?”

I told him he had; whereupon he seated himself, clasped his hands over his knee and posed himself in a listening attitude.

“I have called to know if it is true that Mrs. Ransome is dead,” said I.

“Quite true. She died this morning.”

“So I was informed by the man whom I suppose the house belongs to. Surely her death is very sudden?”

“No,” he answered. “She lived a night longer than I thought she would. I was with her last evening and gave her up then.”

“Am I right in supposing,” I said, satisfied by his manner and answers that she *was* dead, “that she did not wish any com-

munication to be made to her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Ransome of Gardenhurst?"

"Oh, the lady is your daughter, of course. It did not occur to me before. To be sure—she was Miss Kilmain! I understand the motive of your inquiries now. Your conjecture is quite right; Mrs. Ransome emphatically prohibited any notice of her illness or death being given to your daughter. She has left very complete instructions about her funeral and so forth. She puts her body into the hands of Mr. and Mrs. Wadgett, her landlord and his wife, with orders to place it in a coffin and despatch it to Guildford. Mr. Wadgett will accompany the corpse and consign it to the custody of some intimate friend of the deceased."

"Who is that intimate friend, I wonder—her son?"

"No, sir," he exclaimed, looking at me sternly through his spectacles; "that intimate friend is not her son. And, sir, you'll pardon the liberty I take in venturing to feel surprised that, knowing the very grave suspicions which afflicted Mrs. Ransome, and which, I have no hesitation in saying, aided

by her maternal attachment and grief, hastened her death, you should venture to suppose that that intimate friend *should* be her son."

"I arrived at Copsford this afternoon," I exclaimed, "and heard for the first time of the accusation which your patient in her madness thought fit to level at my child. I so strongly suspected that woman's honesty, that I would not be satisfied with her landlord's assurance of her death, but came to you to have the news confirmed, believing her capable of any extravagant deceit. *That* is the object of this visit; not to discuss a subject so utterly preposterous as Mrs. Ransome's delusion."

"I know nothing more than what she has told me. I decline to pass an opinion one way or the other."

"I have not asked you for an opinion," I answered, warmly. "Had that woman lived, I would have forced her to confess herself either mad or utterly wicked. My charity disposes me to think her mad. Human wickedness of the worst description would stop short, I think, of charging an innocent lady with the crime of murder! One question

you can answer me ; is it your belief that Mrs. Ransome was mad ?”

“I will not say,” he replied, deliberately, “that her grief at the supposed death of her son had not unsettled her mind ; but I would not call her mad. Far from it. Her reasoning was as sane as anybody’s I ever listened to.”

“Is it possible,” I cried, “that you can reconcile her sanity with the charge she brings against her daughter-in-law ?”

“I would really—I would really, sir,” he answered, waving his hand and smiling, “prefer not to enter upon this subject. It is no affair of mine. I have given you my opinion of Mrs. Ransome’s sanity. I may be wrong—we are all apt to mistake. The unfortunate lady *may* have been a raving madwoman. I can only say that she struck me as a healthy-minded person who talked with incoherence only when she cried out, in her grief, for her son to be restored to her.”

I got up, bowed to him, and left the room. He accompanied me to the door, remarking upon the freshness of the night, and suggested that since I was just returned from abroad I must feel the difference be-

tween the climates. I barely answered him, and hurried into the street.

His testimony to Mrs. Ransome's sanity indescribably vexed and agitated me. Was he sincere in declaring that he believed her sane? But whether he was sincere or not could matter little; for people would take his word for it, and his assurance would immeasurably deepen the significance of the prejudice the dead woman had excited against Phœbe.

I stood awhile in the street considering what I should do. It was past eight o'clock; the night had fallen, but the pavements were brilliant enough with shop-lights, though here and there some of the shops were being closed. I had an extraordinary reluctance to return to Gardenhurst without having taken some decided step; without having prepared some measure that would enable me to go to work resolutely on the morrow. A man turned to look at me after he had passed, and I shrank some paces away out of the light of the shop before which I had unconsciously halted whilst I debated my next action. My unfortunate sensitiveness made me suffer as



much as though I myself had done some great wrong.

I was about to advance with a half-resolution in my mind to call there and then upon a solicitor and submit my daughter's position to him, when a little elderly man passing at that moment, stopped, looked at me attentively and exclaimed—

“Why, Colonel Kilmain! is it possible that you have come to live among us once more?”

“Mr. Skerlock!” I said; “I hope you are well, sir? It is some time since I had the pleasure of meeting you.”

“Oddly enough,” he replied, “you were in my mind not an hour ago. And yesterday I asked my wife if she had heard whether you had arrived at Gardenhurst.”

“I reached here this afternoon, having hurried from Boulogne in consequence of a pressing letter from my daughter. You do not require to be told of the extraordinary business that has brought me here.”

“No, indeed,” he exclaimed; “and I want to have a chat with you on that very subject. Which way are you walking?”

I answered that I was anxious to have some conversation with him, and proposed that we should turn into the White Hart, the inn where I had hired a bedroom, and which was but a few steps up the street. He asked me to go to his house, but I declined, and we repaired to the inn, where we found the coffee-room empty. I called for some wine and drew my chair close to Mr. Skerlock. He was a spare man, of a dry and dusty aspect, a great consumer of snuff; his face was full of amiability and kindness. He put his hat upon the table, and pulling out his snuff-box opened the conversation by trusting that I would not misconstrue his meaning if he should be frank with me; he felt that he should be thought guilty of presumption in offering either his sympathy or his advice to a gentleman with whom he had not the honour of an intimate acquaintance—and so forth.

“I can assure you,” I replied, “that I was never more in need of sympathy and advice than I am at this moment. When you met me, sir, I had been standing for full ten minutes pondering on how I should act.”

"Understand me at once, Colonel," he exclaimed, "I utterly scout the monstrous supposition which your daughter's mother-in-law has been trying to establish—I suppose you know the old lady is dead?"

"Yes, I have just heard so."

"I may tell you plainly," he continued, "that her death does not and will not promote your daughter's cause. It has already excited sympathy, and we shall find that persons who were before incredulous of her assertions, will now doubtfully shake their heads. As chairman I have incurred some abuse for refusing Mrs. Ransome's application for a summons."

"As chairman!" I exclaimed, not understanding.

"Have you forgotten that I am a magistrate?"

"I remember. I beg your pardon. I have only visited Copsford once during the last two years, and then my stay was a short one."

"My colleagues and I," he said, taking a pinch of snuff, "have provoked much criticism (so I have been given to understand) for not acceding to the old lady's wishes.

But we live in a very small world here. There are a good many poor; and they are clamorous on the inequalities of justice, saying that if Mrs. Ransome had been a rich woman, and your daughter a pauper, the summons would have been granted without demur. Was ever such nonsense talked! As if a summons *could* be granted on such evidence as the old lady offered! No, sir; my colleagues and I (advised by our clerk, who though a stationer by trade, is as sound a lawyer as ever I met) did our duty in this matter; and we shall do it again though the populace should rise and threaten us!"

He rapped his snuff-box excitedly, and then smiled and nodded.

"But do you really believe that Mrs. Ransome was sincere in supposing that her son had been murdered?" I asked.

"I am afraid that cannot be doubted."

"Did she not strike you as being mad?"

He sipped his wine, dropped his head on one side, and answered mysteriously—

"Mad as a March hare. But no one will believe me. There was the excitement of lunacy in her eye, sir, when she was refused

her application ; and then she began to argue with amazing vehemence—though, mind you, not without logic—and eventually had to be ordered out of the room.”

“ But you know her son is mad ? ”

“ Oh, yes ; that *is* known.”

“ You also know that her son was in the habit of absenting himself for weeks at a time from his mother, without apprising her of his departure or return ? ”

“ Yes, she admitted that.”

“ Then in God's name ! ” I cried, “ what can she mean, by charging my daughter with having killed her husband ? ”

“ Now we come to the point, Colonel,” he answered, holding up his fingers and telling them off as he spoke. “ You must first of all know that her evidence was to this effect :—That your daughter (as she was prepared to prove) had been repeatedly heard to threaten Mr. Ransome's life ; that she used him like a dog and never neglected an opportunity to insult and degrade him before his servants ; that, though it was true he was in the habit of leaving the house without communicating his intention of doing so, yet never before had he quitted it in the

dead of night, and never before, in her experience, had he been longer away than a fortnight at the very outside without writing to say where he was; that she had herself seen enough of Mrs. Ransome to persuade her that she was capable, in her passion, of committing murder; that her conviction was, either that Mrs. Ransome in a fury had killed her husband, or procured some assassin to do the work for her; that the latter conjecture was rendered highly probable by the mysterious disappearance of the footman on the night of Mr. Ransome's disappearance, by the abstraction of the plate which would serve to mislead suspicion and fix it upon the obvious commission of a comparatively small crime by which Mr. Ransome, in seeming to be concerned in it, would be shown to be alive; and by Mrs. Ransome from that hour to this, never having taken any steps for the recovery of the plate, for the apprehension of the thief, or for the pursuit of her husband."

The old gentleman had checked off his fingers and now plunged them into his snuff-box, his eyes on my face.

"All these arguments can be met and

silenced," I answered. "But I am sure that you have disposed of them in your own mind, and I have no right to inflict a long and superfluous explanation upon you. The one point I have to consider is—how am I to clear my daughter's character of the suspicion Mrs. Ransome's accusation has left upon her?"

"The great mistake your daughter made, Colonel," he answered, "was in neglecting to instruct the Inspector to follow up the robbery of the plate. It is her total silence, her withholding from all action that has given foundation to reports and started the curious and vicious theories people are promulgating. I took the liberty of calling on her and representing the necessity of having the matter inquired into; not because I anticipated the sinister result that has attended her inaction, but because I considered it mercifully necessary that her husband, being an irresponsible person, should not be suffered to wander at large."

"She tells me she believed he would return to her any day," I replied. "She also believed that the robbery of the plate was a part of his scheme to bring shame and sorrow

upon her ; and wild as the theory appears, yet nothing is impossible to madness. She refused to instruct the Inspector because her pride abhorred the thought of taking any step which might ultimately lead to her confession of the miserable life she led with Mr. Ransome. Knowing her character as I do, how proud and self-willed she is, I believe in her explanation firmly ; and I believe it to be all the more true because of the very inconsistency, perversity and singularity of motives it forces her to avow."

"And I believe her too, sir," exclaimed the old gentleman, earnestly. "Let any man look at her, speak to her, and imagine her guilty if he can, of *any* crime—let alone this!"

I seized his hand and shook it warmly.

"Thank you," I said, "for the courage your words put into me. I would ask you now if I have no remedy against the Inspector for his unwarrantable intrusion on my daughter?"

"I am afraid not ; he can only be charged with excess of zeal, and the law looks softly upon such transgressions. But will you allow me to recommend the course I consider the only advisable one for you to follow?"



"If you please."

"Your first step should be to call on the Inspector, formally charge the footman with the robbery of the plate, and explain that your daughter's ignorance of such matters was her reason for not directing him to pursue the man before."

I at once saw the policy of this.

"That suggestion shall be carried out to-morrow morning," I exclaimed.

Mr. Skerlock looked pleased.

"The next thing," he continued, "is to find your son-in-law, dead or alive."

"Undoubtedly."

"That you must endeavour to accomplish by advertisements, offers of reward, and by putting the matter into the hands of men accustomed to this sort of work. My friend, Mr. Clements, has had to employ a man of this kind. If you will call on him, he will give you the man's address and you can write to him."

I thanked him for his practical advice.

"Some," he continued, "would recommend you not to act in the matter; to treat it with silent contempt, and so forth. But contempt (and you could not feel it) would

be mistaken for indifference, and would therefore be rash. Your daughter's name is dear to you. It would be very dear to me if I owned her for a daughter. Though your inquiries should prove fruitless, yet when people hear that you *are* inquiring, they will find evidence of innocence in it; and they will have no further cause to complain of your daughter's inhumanity in suffering a crazy husband to wander at the mercy of the world. Mankind are very full of cant," he exclaimed, with a twinkling eye; "we must recognise, we must bow to it, if we want to seem either what we are or what we are not."

This said, I looked at the time and debated within myself whether to return to Gardenhurst or to send a messenger there to tell my daughter I should sleep at Copsford. I finally resolved to bear Phœbe company, having much to hear from her and Miss Ivory. However, I did not want to lose my friendly companion in a hurry; it was still early, he showed no impatience to be gone, but drank his wine with relish, and seemed to have made himself very happy by cheering me up.

It was a source of great comfort to me to know that he utterly discredited the old wo-

man's accusation, for I could converse with him on the subject on the thorough understanding that the whole thing was either a conspiracy between the mother and son, or an extraordinary and incredible misapprehension on her part of the facts. The great interest he took in the matter, and the hearty sympathy he expressed, determined me on being perfectly unreserved with him. I told him the story of the marriage, my objection to it, my grave doubts as to Mr. Ransome's sanity, my daughter's obstinacy, which forced me to yield to her. I pointed out that there might be good reasons for old Mrs. Ransome's antipathy to my daughter and myself in the aversion I had shown to the engagement, which she had no doubt regarded as an insult, since I had never the courage to tell her that my objection was based on my doubt of her son's sanity ; so that, from my avoidance of the truth, she might have drawn conclusions highly obnoxious to her pride, which was that of a woman who had a very high opinion of her station in life. I explained to him that, on Phœbe's testimony, many of the quarrels that had arisen between her and her husband were owing to the mother, who had been intrusive, insolent,

and meddlesome. In short, I recounted all the facts I could remember to justify my suspicion of the old woman's having acted from a malicious motive. He agreed with me that the evidence was strongly in favour of such a supposition, and he did not doubt that a great deal of malice had been at the root of her persistent accusation ; but he would have to assume an incomprehensible degree of wickedness, if he denied her sincerity in believing that her son had met with his death by violence. She had never swerved from that view from the moment she had communicated with the Inspector. Unless she was sincere, could we believe she would have had the courage to take upon herself the enormous responsibility of such a charge ? She never professed to have received intimations of his death by supernatural means, such as by his ghost having appeared to her, or by a dream, or by a mysterious voice, or by any other nonsense by which an old woman, and a crazy old woman, might endeavour to fortify her statements. She founded her arguments on the most prosaic premises, as a counsel would ; on the circumstantial evidence of her daughter-in-law's fits of passion, her repeated threats to kill

her husband, her inaction in the matter of the robbery, and the double disappearance—all which, there being nobody to confute her, had filled the public mind with foolish fancies and preposterous prejudices.

As I listened to Mr. Skerlock, one idea impressed itself upon me—that the old gentleman's familiarity with Mrs. Ransome's arguments, and his knowledge of the state of public feeling, proved that the subject was a notorious one. This conviction emphasized the need of immediate action.

Our long and friendly conference was terminated by his repeating his advice to me to start the Inspector without delay after the footman, and to employ every means in my power to discover Mr. Ransome's whereabouts.

"If," he said, "the footman can be found and the robbery proved against him, the theory which has obtained that he was an instrument in your daughter's hands will be exploded, and such a discovery is certain to bring about a revulsion of prejudice. Flatter the Inspector by placing the matter in his hands—he is a talker, and will unconsciously serve your ends by telling everybody his commission. But do not let the matter rest

with him. The man who is to search for your son-in-law may as well search for the footman also. The police are sharp enough, but there is no sharpness equal to that of the man whom you pay highly for his discoveries."

I repeated my thanks to him for his advice, and he answered that it gave him great happiness to serve me; that ever since he had met my daughter he had taken the greatest interest in her; that he sincerely felt for me in the trying position I was placed in, and that he should watch the steps he had advised me to take with the greatest anxiety.

We bade each other good-night, and departed.

Thus far for the present. I yield my place again to Miss Ivory, who, for reasons which will presently be obvious, is better able than myself to continue the narrative. A few passages in the commencement of her relation are omitted, to make way for the interpolation I am now concluding, in order to save repetition, and to make her story proceed regularly from the point where mine stops.



## THE HOUSEKEEPER'S STORY

*(Continued).*

### I.

**I**T was hard upon ten o'clock before the Colonel returned from Copsford. I did not expect him, for he had told me that he had engaged a bedroom at the inn, and I thought he would sleep there.

He drove up in a fly, his portmanteau was handed out, and calling to me (for I had been attracted to the hall by the ringing of the bell, never hearing the summons now without conceiving that Mr. Ransome had returned), he asked me to be so good as to prepare a bedroom for him, and then join him and his daughter, as he wished to speak to me.

He was very pale, with a tired and yet an agitated expression in his face. I felt

very sorry for him, as much so as ever I felt for his daughter.

I got ready the bedroom that old Mrs. Ransome was to have slept in, and having lingered long enough to give him time to relate the result of his visit to Copsford to his daughter, descended and entered the dining-room where they were.

He was addressing her earnestly, but broke off when he saw me, and instantly Mrs. Ransome exclaimed—

“She is dead, Miss Avory! She died this morning.”

“Is it possible!” I answered, knowing perfectly well whom she meant.

The Colonel rose, and, with an air of great courtesy, placed a chair for me near to where they were sitting.

“I doubted the news at first,” he said, resuming his seat; “but it is unquestionably true, for it was confirmed by the doctor who attended her, and by Mr. Skerlock, a gentleman,” he added, warmly, “who, by his sympathy and advice, has placed me under an obligation to him I shall never forget while I live.”

“I would to heaven,” cried Mrs. Ran-



some, "that that miserable wicked old woman had died two years ago. I should have been saved all this misery."

Her father rebuked her vehemence with a glance, and addressing me, said—

"I desire to thank you, Miss Ivory, for the sympathy and kindness you have shown my daughter since you have been in this house. It consoles me to think that she should have found so sincere a friend in you in the absence of myself, whom she has thought fit to keep in ignorance of the very wretched life she has been leading since her marriage."

I made some suitable reply, and then he related to me the story of his visit to Copsford. I listened to him attentively, and was much struck by the strong common sense the suggestions Mr. Skerlock had offered him illustrated.

"We cannot improve upon that advice, I think, Miss Ivory," he remarked.

"No, sir."

"It will cost me some prevarication," he said, looking at me anxiously. "I shall have to tell the Inspector that my daughter objected to the idea of having her name

brought forward, and that that, and her ignorance, were the reason of her omitting to tell him to follow Maddox. But I *must* be guilty of some deceit to deal successfully with this overwhelming suspicion. Could we learn where Mr. Ransome is, then the strict and whole truth would be our only policy; but whilst he remains in hiding, we can prove nothing; we can only illustrate our innocence by our actions, and we must be very cautious to do nothing that can strengthen the prejudice and doubt which already exist."

"I should consider any precaution justifiable under such circumstances," I exclaimed.

He turned to his daughter.

"Phoebe, it is your violent temper that is the cause of all this. You have been heard to threaten your husband's life. How could you say such a thing?"

"There were times when I could have killed him," she answered, turning pale.

"But that is an awful threat," he said, "and it has been wrested to an awful purpose. Even Mr. Skerlock, whose heartiest sympathy is with us, declares that the old

lady was sincere in believing that her son met with his death through you; and it was on those reckless words of yours that she most insisted."

"I would have killed him! I would have killed him!" she muttered. "I once showed Miss Avory the marks of his fingers on my arm. Before she had even entered the house, he had struck me across the face with his hand. Ruffian! I would have killed him, and his mother knew it."

He looked at her intently, and then, in a voice so strange that I cannot attempt to describe it, he exclaimed—

"Phœbe, do you know what has become of him?"

She started, looked up, the blood rushed into her face; she answered shrilly and wildly—

"No—no! why do you ask me? My God! do you mistrust me?"

He pressed his handkerchief to his face, and his hand trembled violently.

"You should not speak as you do," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "You terrify me. Thank God others have not questioned you."

He still looked at her fixedly, and there was silence between them. Suddenly she shrieked out—

“Were I on my deathbed I would still say there were times when I could have killed him. Did I know that he was dead now I would fall on my knees and thank God. I hate him as never woman hated a man! But,” her voice sank and she dropped her head, “I do not know where he is.”

He continued looking at her for some moments, and then waved his hand.

“Miss Ivory, to-morrow I commence business. There is much to be done. I suppose I shall have to go to London to see the man whom Mr. Skerlock’s friend is to recommend to me. On my return I shall reside here. Phœbe, have you a likeness of your husband?”

“Yes,” she answered.

Her face was very white, and there was a shocked expression in it. Indeed, I myself had turned pale in remarking the manner in which the Colonel had asked her if she knew where her husband was. Could I doubt old Mrs. Ransome’s sincerity when I saw how *he* had yielded to the quick prompt-

ing of suspicion? Could I wonder that the town had taken up the tale to the prejudice of Mrs. Ransome when her own father could doubt her, though but for a moment?

"Let me have it," he said, speaking in a softened voice. She left the room. He followed her with his eyes to the door, watching with the admiration of a stranger in which was mixed the deep anxiety he felt, her graceful movements and the peculiar sweeping action of her gait, so strangely suggestive of her pride and resolution and the haughtiness under which even I, who knew how much was to be forgiven her, often winced.

The moment the door was closed he turned to me swiftly and said—

"Miss Ivory, do you think she knows more of this mystery than she chooses to tell?"

"No more than I do, sir," I answered; staggered by the significance of the question.

"She says *now*—now to my face, that she could have killed him!" he continued, in a loud whisper. "What made the old lady so persistent? . . . Look at her! her temper

may have been embroiled by her husband's ruffianly treatment. I saw a dangerous fire in her eyes when she spoke of him. What would not such hate as hers prompt?"

He left his chair and paced the room and then exclaimed—

"My God! what madness am I talking! No, no! I am extravagant! The horrible anxiety I have undergone since I first heard the story from her has upset my mind. Poor girl! she should have told me before; I would have taken her from him. Poor girl!" he repeated, and smiled at me wanly.

"You must not allow the faintest doubt of her innocence to possess you, sir," I exclaimed. "Believe me! I watched her. I have been by her side throughout this dreadful affair; as I believe in my own innocence I believe in hers. She has no more conception whether her husband is living or dead than I have. I cannot say more sir."

He stepped up to me, grasped my hand and walked to the window, where he stood with his back to the room. I was glad to have said what I did and to have said it at once; suspicion is as contagious as fever;

and had I given myself time to think I might have faltered in my answer.

She came back with a large plain gold locket, which she gave to her father. He looked at the portrait inside it attentively, and asked her if she knew what her husband's age was when the likeness was taken. She thought about twenty-five. The mother had sent it to her shortly after her marriage. She had never worn it. She only remembered having it by being asked for a portrait of the man. It was fortunate that she had not come across it before—she would have destroyed it.

He paid no attention to this outbreak, but handing me the locket, asked me if I thought the portrait was sufficiently like to enable a stranger in search of Mr. Ransome to identify him. I drew close to the lamp and after a short inspection answered, that it might help out an accurate and minute description of him ; but that he appeared in the likeness at least ten years younger-looking, and that he was represented with his hair parted, which very much altered him.

“Have you not a more recent portrait of him?” he asked his daughter.

"No," she answered.

"Then this must do! As Miss Avory says, it will help to illustrate a description. His was an uncommon kind of face," he said, addressing me. "Eyes such as his are not often seen in Europeans."

"He might disguise himself," I replied.

"Yes, I have thought of that."

"But suppose he has left the country?" exclaimed Mrs. Ransome.

"If I can obtain proof that he has done so I shall want nothing better. If I can only get evidence to show that he was seen alive on the day following his disappearance from this house, I shall be satisfied. Let us look at our position; suspicion has been excited that this man has met with foul play, it has been brought to bear straight upon you by the mother in causing this house to be searched and in applying for a summons against you. We have to choose between two alternatives; we can sell or let Gardenhurst and quit the neighbourhood; or we can strive the uttermost in our power to prove the suspicion a monstrous and false one. If we quit the neighbourhood we shall appear to justify the woman's accusation."



"I should not consent to go," exclaimed Mrs. Ransome, passionately. "They shall not drive me away."

"Certainly we must not leave until we have done everything that can be done to prove that Mr. Ransome left this house of his own accord. Any day he may return; any day Maddox may be captured. But I have made up my mind," he added, vehemently, "the moment this wretched mystery is cleared up to separate you from your husband and sell Gardenhurst. Let the issue be what it may, our name is dishonoured, the darkest shame that ever fell upon a family has fallen upon us. This very evening I entered Copsford as a felon might, dreading the eyes of those I met, slinking past shops, and cowering in the gloom; and by one man—Eastwell—was met with an insulting commiseration such as I might bestow upon a wounded dog. I will have no argument," he cried, passionately, seeing that she was about to speak; "you have called me to you and I will protect you. But there must be no opposition to my wishes. My will must be your law—my weakness with you has borne

its fruits in this. Never more shall I be influenced by considerations of what *you* may call your happiness; you have qualities in you which render you unfit to act for yourself, and I have registered a vow to suffer no other judgment than my own to direct me in the future."

She raised her gleaming eyes to his face, let them drop suddenly, but made no answer. She was cowed by his impetuosity, and sat with her hands tightly clasped upon her knee, quite still.

I considered that my presence was no longer necessary, and rose to bid them good-night. The Colonel opened the door for me, and I was touched by the courteous smile he gave me, which only served to light up the deep grief and anxiety that had already made his face as haggard as his daughter's.

After I had been in my room twenty minutes I heard them come into the hall and bid each other good-night. I sent the servants to bed and locked up the basement as usual and went upstairs, but was surprised to find the hall-door open, and the Colonel standing on the threshold smoking.

He looked round leisurely, saw me, and threw his cigar away.

"I see you are locking up, Miss Ivory. Shall I close and bolt this door for you?" He did so as he asked the question. "I am going to bed in a moment. I am very tired. It is strange to me to stand under this familiar roof again—but what pleasures, what years of my life would I not gladly forfeit to change the circumstances under which I find myself in this house!"

"We must hope that this trouble will soon pass, sir," I said. "I live in constant expectation of seeing Mr. Ransome return."

"I wish he would! I wish he would!" he exclaimed. "You noticed the unjust suspicion that seized me in the dining-room? I did my poor girl a grievous wrong in that brief moment. But *why* will she not curb her temper? Why will she, in the face of the horrible doubts that hang over this house, recklessly persist in declaring that she could have killed her husband, and in wishing him dead? But he is a great villain!" he added, clenching his hand. "My daughter has been treating me to a passage or two out of her married life. Wonderful that she should have held out so long—that she should have kept these miserable secrets so entirely hidden from me!"

He approached the hall-table, took a candle and lighted it at mine.

"There *cannot* be a doubt," he said, "that she is utterly ignorant not only of his whereabouts, but of his motive for leaving her—unless the misery that has followed his disappearance was his motive, which I will not believe."

He looked at me so inquiringly that I easily saw, despite his assurance to the contrary, that he could not rid his mind of a lurking suspicion of his daughter.

"Unquestionably she is ignorant," I answered, earnestly.

"Yes, unquestionably," he repeated. "The robbery of the plate is a genuine piece of thievery on the part of the footman—of that I am persuaded—Mr. Ransome knows nothing about it. The execution of their respective plans fell upon the same night; but that they acted without knowledge of each other's intention I am as convinced as that I am now addressing you. More than this—I utterly disagree with my daughter in viewing her husband's disappearance and the subsequent accusation of his mother as a conspiracy between them. The woman was crazy: she hated my daughter, and believed

her capable of murdering her son—a mad-woman's hallucination, which is not to be reasoned upon. Enough that it existed—that she argued from her barbarous premiss with enough logic to render people credulous, that she has cast upon my daughter a suspicion that, in the absence of the ruffian who is the cause of all this unhappiness, it may tax the subtlest mind in the world to disprove. The motive of his absence I cannot conjecture. I only hope he is not dead. If he has committed suicide, for instance, or gone abroad under an assumed name, my daughter's look-out will be a desperate one. One year from this date I shall dedicate to the unravelling of this mystery. If by the end of that time nothing has happened to explain the puzzle, I shall sell this property and take my daughter abroad."

He seemed to find relief in speaking thus freely; but he suddenly perceived that he was keeping me from my bed, and, with an apology for his thoughtlessness, he again wished me good-night, and went upstairs.

He came downstairs very shortly after me next morning, and went into the grounds while his breakfast was preparing. From the dining-room window I saw him conversing

with the under-gardener, Poole, and then I observed him eye that portion of the house where Mr. Ransome's bedroom was, critically. He then walked with the man to the bottom of the grounds, where I lost sight of him.

The morning was a bright one, autumnal in colouring and perfume. I went out to collect some of the fruit which the wind shook from the heavily-laden pear and apple trees in the kitchen gardens to set the best of them on the breakfast-table; and as I returned with my apron full I saw the Colonel approaching the house.

He found his breakfast ready, and seated himself to it; and when I entered the room bearing some of the fruit I had collected, he said—

“It has occurred to me, Miss Ivory, that our shrewd Inspector only half did his business when he ransacked this house. Why did he not search the grounds? I have told Poole to look among the trees at the bottom yonder. In matters of this kind it sometimes happens that the apparently wildest surmise is the true one. Suppose Mr. Ransome should have taken it into his head to go and hang himself on one of

the trees over there, or shoot himself among them?"

"That is a dreadful fancy!" I exclaimed, with an involuntary shudder.

"So it is, and a foolish one too, I dare say. However, Poole has promised to search the grounds. He seems to take a great interest in this affair. His theory is, that Maddox in stealing the plate, encountered his master and killed him. By the way, I forgot to ask you, when you came downstairs that morning and found Mr. Ransome gone, did you find any window or door open?"

"No, sir: and in my surprise at the time I never thought of asking the question. But on my making the inquiry a few days afterwards, Mary (the girl who was dismissed) told me that she had found one of the drawing-room windows leading on to the terrace open, but had forgotten to mention it."

"I wonder if that girl knows anything that will throw a light on this mystery? Do you think she does?"

"No, sir; nor would I ask her; for rather than not seem to know, she will tell a falsehood and mislead us."

"She was the woman who swore to hear-

ing my daughter threaten her husband's life?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did she tell the truth in that?"

"I fear she did. I myself have heard Mrs. Ransome use the same threat."

"Reckless, foolish girl!" he exclaimed. "How our idlest words come home like curses to us. *That's* the foundation on which the ugly structure of suspicion is erected. When will she learn to moderate her miserable temper?"

He looked at his watch, then hurriedly applied himself to his breakfast, and I left the room.

Half an hour afterwards he went out. From a bedroom window I saw him trudging towards the avenue; with his head bowed and his hands clasped behind him. He looked a thorough gentleman. Some might have found fault with him for a certain want of life in his manner; but speaking for myself, I am always best pleased with a grave deportment in a man who has reached to middle age. The Colonel was tall and slender, with grey whiskers and moustache, an aquiline nose, and a full, mild, dark eye.



His voice was very pleasing, with even a note of sweetness in it. As I watched him disappear among the trees of the avenue, I heartily wished that good luck would attend his efforts.

Shortly after he was gone, Mrs. Ransome came downstairs and asked me if her father had left the house.

"I wish he had asked me to go with him," she exclaimed, on my answering her. "I should like to face that impudent Inspector and demand how he dared enter my house. With papa at my side, I should have the courage to do anything. Indeed, I have a great mind to go out riding for several days a week for the next month. I would gallop right through Copsford, and let the people see how much truth there is in the old wretch's accusation by my utter indifference."

"If I were you, madam, I would do nothing without first consulting Colonel Kilmain."

"But am I to make a convent of this house and die here like a poisoned rat in a hole, because a vile and wicked old creature chooses to hold the most monstrous and ridiculous opinions respecting her son's disappearance?"

I made no answer, being quite satisfied that all this talk was mere bravado. She looked at me steadily, and after a pause of some moments, said—

“Did you notice the strange way in which my father, last night, asked me if I knew more about my husband’s disappearance than I chose to tell?”

“I heard him ask you a question of that kind.”

She was silent again; and then burst out passionately, whilst her face grew pale—

“How can I wonder that strangers suspect me to be guilty of all that the old woman charged me with, when my father doubts me?”

“You must not think that he doubts you,” I answered, gently. “He was prompted to ask the question by the words you made use of.”

“What words?”

“You said you could have killed your husband.”

“It is God’s own truth!” she cried. “Over and over again I could have killed him! and so much do I hate him—thinking of him now—though he may be dead for anything

I know—that had I killed him I never should have felt one jot of remorse or horror in recalling the deed.”

I threw a hasty glance around, and exclaimed—

“Pray, madam, be cautious. Think what construction would be placed upon your words, should they be overheard.”

I looked at her shrinkingly, and even with a feeling of dread. The intensity she threw into her utterance made her declaration almost as startling as if she had confessed to having killed her husband.

She tossed back her head with a smile filled with obstinacy and scorn. The light was on her, and I noticed the violet hue under her eyes, the thinness of her throat, the paleness of her lips. Indeed, a great change had come over her since the day on which the Inspector had been brought to the house by the old lady; a change subtle and physical, exhibited by the wasting, not only of her face, but of her whole figure, and by a hard, subacid expression which appreciably modified the character of her beauty. With her head thrown back, and that strange scornful smile about her lips, she stared at me

with obstinate intentness ; and when neither understanding nor relishing her protracted gaze, I was about to turn away, she said—

“ You too suspect me ! ”

“ You wrong me by thinking so,” I answered, quickly ; “ nor is there warrant for your belief in anything I have said or done.”

She drew a deep breath, and exclaimed—

“ You seemed afraid of me. Why should you be scared by the truth ? Is it not true that I hate my husband ? When I showed you my arm—you remember ?—you thought my hate justified. If I were to tell you how he has made me suffer—not with his hands, though God knows he has not spared them—but with his tongue, before I had half gone through the catalogue of his brutalities you would be telling me that you too could have killed him had you been in my place. But have no fear,” she added, changing her voice and resuming her scornful smile, “ if he has been murdered, his death is owing to no contrivance of mine.”

“ My only reason in urging you not to speak of yourself as having been sometimes tempted to kill him is, that no further excuse may be furnished to people to preserve the abominable suspicion which I fear is current.

The Colonel has a very difficult matter to deal with, and looks to you for help. I who know you, and know how you have suffered, put a very liberal construction on your references to the past. Your assurance is nothing but a mere form of words. You could have killed him!—that is, the provocation he gave you was so unendurable that, when you recur to it, you feel that he goaded you to passions which might have tempted you to any act of violence. I can sympathize with the memory—but other people are not so generous. They will take your words literally, and establish them as a premiss from which to deduce the crime that the mad old woman charged you with.”

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away, humming a tune. The movement was a chilling one. I left the room, resolute, however, not to judge her harshly, knowing how bitter had been her past sufferings, and how heavy was the trial she was now undergoing.

## II.

The Colonel returned at one o'clock. I happened to be in Mrs. Ransome's bedroom, which was over the dining-room, and heard

him call to the under-gardener, who was at work on the lawn—

“My man, go round to the kitchen and tell them to give you my portmanteau, and carry it at once to the White Hart.”

“Yes, sir,” answered the man; and he added, “I’ve searched as you told me, and haven’t found nothing.”

“Oh, well, I did not expect you would. Give the portmanteau to the people in the bar, and tell them I have booked for the coach at half-past two. Also request them to send a fly to be here at two precisely.”

These orders announced his speedy departure, and I ran downstairs with the intention of hastening forward the lunch, but met him as I crossed the hall.

“Where is my daughter?” he asked me.

I looked into the drawing-room, and seeing one of the windows open, went to it and caught sight of her walking a little way beyond the terrace. Her head was uncovered, and her abundant hair gleamed with a violet sheen in the sun. She was lost in thought, and neither heard nor saw me until I was addressing her at her elbow. She instantly followed me to the drawing-room, where her father waited.

"My dear," he exclaimed, in a voice of mild reproof, "I thought you would have been on the look-out for me."

"I did not know when I was to expect you, papa."

"I have passed a busy morning," he began; but I interrupted him by asking if he meant to lunch at home, that I might give orders to the cook.

"Susan knows all about that," he answered. "Do not leave the room, Miss Ivory. I have nothing particular to tell—and if I had you would have every right to hear it. I went straight to the Inspector's office on leaving here, and had a long interview with him."

"I hope you spoke your mind to him, papa," exclaimed Mrs. Ransome, firing up at the mention of the man. "I should like to have been with you. I want an opportunity to tell him what I think of his conduct."

"You must put aside all resentment," he answered. "Your cause will not be helped by passion. I caution you that our situation is more critical than you suppose it. I forced myself—God knows how reluctantly, and with what pain—to speak to several persons this morning, and, though it was impossible

for me to extort their real opinions from them, I found, unmistakably, that the prejudice is strong against you. I cannot explain my discovery by using their words, but I felt it in their superficial sympathy, in their evasive answers, in their recurrence to Mrs. Ransome's death, which, it is now going about, is owing to her heart being broken by the loss of her son."

She stamped her foot, crying, "What an impudent fiction."

"You speak of the Inspector's insolence," he continued; "the man met me with great respect; regretted the necessity that had obliged him to enter the house, and pointed out that, had he not acted on the strong evidence of Mrs. Ransome and the girl Mary, his enemies would have reported him as unfit for his duties, as wanting zeal and energy, as being intimidated by rich people, though never scrupling to enter a poor man's house (which he had occasion to do, he told me, only a fortnight ago). It was not my policy to be angry with him. It is not my policy to be angry with anybody just now. The dead woman has raised up a number of cacklers against us, especially



among the poorer classes, who are indignant with the magistrates for refusing a summons against you. I have to conciliate these people, not insult them. Is it not so, Miss Ivory?"

"Undoubtedly, sir."

"Why should they be conciliated?" cried Mrs. Ransome. "They must be wretches who can believe what that vile old thing said of me; and if I only knew how to punish them for daring to suspect me I would."

He held his hand up, as if to silence her.

"You must not interrupt me," he exclaimed. "My time is very short here, and if we get upon these senseless arguments, I shall not be able to explain my intentions to you."

He looked at his watch, and continued—

"I first of all went to the Inspector, and was with him for an hour at least. I told him all about Mr. Ransome and his madness, and how, among his other habits, was that of leaving the house mysteriously; that he had often left his mother's house in this manner, and that she very well knew it to be one of his eccentricities. I carried

out Mr. Skerlock's suggestions faithfully, by pointing out that it was owing partly to your ignorance of such matters, and partly to your dislike to having your name mixed up in a police affair, that you had not instructed him to follow Maddox on a charge of robbery. I said that you had no idea where your husband was, and that you daily expected his return. I then declared there could be no doubt that the footman had stolen the plate, and I begged him to lose no time to make every possible inquiry for the man, since continuance of the terrible suspicion that had fallen on you, might altogether depend upon his apprehension."

He watched his daughter attentively as he spoke.

"What did the Inspector say, sir?" I ventured to ask.

"That he would do his best," he answered; "but that I mustn't hope for much, seeing the long time the man had had to make off in." He paused, and added, bitterly, "Miss Ivory, that fellow is the most suspicious of the lot."

"But that will not prevent him from obeying your instructions?"

"I do not say," he exclaimed, shaking his head, "that what I have done has been for the best. In speaking to him, I more than once doubted the wisdom of my visit. Respectful as he was, he yet contrived to suggest that he regarded my instructions as an effort to blind him; and if he thinks *that*, then, by heaven! he must conclude that I believe my daughter guilty, and am trying to save her from detection."

Mrs. Ransome exclaimed, "That man would *oblige* himself to believe me guilty, merely that he might justify himself for his daring outrage."

"That is highly probable, sir," I said. "I do not think it necessary to allow oneself to be troubled by *his* conclusions. He is a muddle-headed man, with a slow mind, that would require a long time to rid itself of an impression."

"But," replied the Colonel, "there are many wiseacres in the town who are satisfied to form their judgments by his. It is lucky perhaps that I *did* assume him suspicious in my conversation, otherwise I might have been led into explanations from which, his conclusions being foregone, he might

have picked many details to strengthen his own views with. I must be chary of explanations. The mere truth, in the absence of Mr. Ransome and Maddox, cannot improve our case, and portions of it are likely to injure us, if those points upon which suspicion is based are kept back."

"What points?" asked Mrs. Ransome.

"Your wretched quarrels," he answered, flushing up; "and above all, your reckless, passionate, evil threats."

She hung her head. He took a turn about the room, and pulled out his watch for the third time, but was so deep in thought that he kept his eyes fixed upon it for some moments without seeming to know what he was doing.

He looked up suddenly and said—

"Phoebe, I leave at half-past two. I have the address of the man I want from Mr. Clements." He drew forth his pocket-book, but replaced it without opening it. "I may be away for a day or two—I cannot say how long. I shall probably employ others as well as this person. Of course I shall return to Gardenhurst and continue living here. But take one caution, unless

you can trust your temper, keep yourself hidden. This is a frightful time for me—a horrible term of suspense remains beyond—you must help me hand and heart. You will ruin us both, utterly prejudice your case, and defeat all my efforts if you suffer your dangerous temper to obtain a mastery over you in your conversations with strangers. We," he exclaimed, pointing to me, "know the truth, but we are alone; it is in your power to help me by your silence, or to crush us both by repeating to whomsoever will listen to you, those dreadful threats you have used in your passion to your husband, which, even as you utter them, you seem capable of carrying out."

He walked to the door and she made a movement as though she would run after him; but she drew back proudly, and when he was out of the room, followed leisurely.

There was, beyond all question, great wisdom in his advice to her to keep herself hidden. Her manner even to her father was aggressive; she had no control over her temper; and as no subject made her more violently passionate than her husband, so it was really imperative that she should not

discuss him and his disappearance with strangers, since it was ten to one that her angry warmth prompted her to some observation to furnish fresh scope for gossip and comment. It was indeed scarcely conceivable to me, who thought I knew the truth perfectly, that people were to be found who gave credit to old Mrs. Ransome's horrible accusation. But this was actually the case, and I remember fearing, as I watched the Colonel drive off, that if his endeavours did not result in some practical discovery, public opinion might become strong enough to force the law into a decided attitude, and subject Mrs. Ransome to the merciless ignominy of a judicial investigation.

Unfortunately I had no friends at Copsford, with the exception of the Campions, who, owing to the manner in which I had defended Mrs. Ransome on the occasion of my visit to Rose Farm, were very reserved in the expression of their views. The tradesmen whom we dealt with of course knew me; and were not likely to risk the loss of our custom by declaring their opinions. However, by putting the small

evidence I myself collected from signs and shakes of the head and doubting questions, with the evidence that I extracted from the gossip brought to Gardenhurst by the cook and the housemaid, I was pretty sure that the Colonel had not over-estimated the gravity of the general feeling. The public dearly loves a mystery ; and when, as in this case, it is a very personal one, it will commonly show itself partial to the solutions which are most prejudicial to the characters of those who are associated with the mystery.

Here was a woman of whom exaggerated accounts had been diffused of the fierceness of her temper. On a certain night her husband, with whom she was incessantly quarrelling, and of whom her detestation was no secret, mysteriously disappears. On the same night the footman likewise mysteriously disappears, and with him or them goes plate to the value of eight or nine hundred pounds. The inference drawn by the public, pending the arrival of the old lady upon the scene, is either that the footman has murdered the master, or that the master, who is notoriously of unsound mind, has for some utterly un conjecturable reason,

helped the footman to rob the house. Both suppositions are equally probable. But meanwhile no steps are taken by Mrs. Ransome to recover the plate, neither is a single inquiry made for the missing husband. Her silence adds piquancy to the mystery and fills the public mind with wonderment. Suddenly old Mrs. Ransome comes forward; and so convinces the chief constable at Copsford that murder has been done, that the house at Gardenhurst is searched. No discovery is made; but the old lady is not the less persuaded that her son has been murdered; and on the testimony of the girl Mary, who swears to having heard Mrs. Ransome threaten to kill her husband, she applies for a summons against her daughter-in-law, which is refused. Whereupon she dies, and is commiserated as a broken-hearted mother.

Speaking for myself, I do honestly say that had I been a perfect stranger to the Ransomes and heard the above story, not as I have abbreviated it, but with all the garnishings which gossip and exaggeration had furnished, I should have entertained serious doubts whether, after all, the old



lady might not have had very good reason for concluding that her son had been murdered either by or through the wife ; nor can I imagine that any consideration of the man's insanity, of the footman's simultaneous disappearance, of the robbery of the plate, of Mr. Ransome's previous erratic habits, would have shaken the suspicions with which I would have viewed Mrs. Ransome's inactivity.

It is well to keep the circumstances of the mystery steadily in view in order to appreciate the very critical position in which Mrs. Ransome was placed.

### III.

Colonel Kilmain remained in London three days ; at the end of that time he returned to Gardenhurst ; but of what he had done, I obtained no information further than that he had engaged the services of the man who had been recommended to him, and that this man had expressed his wish that the matter might be left solely in his hands. His reasons for desiring to act alone had satisfied the Colonel, and they were no doubt

good. I gathered that this man rated his services at a very high sum; and that in addition to the money that was to be paid for his work, he was to receive a handsome reward from the Colonel if he made any discovery that would exculpate Mrs. Ransome from all participation in the mystery of the double disappearance.

Life at Gardenhurst, from this point, became a dull and monotonous routine. I scarcely knew how the days passed; they were entirely eventless, and slipped imperceptibly away. I speak as they affected me. As to the Colonel, I know that he lived in a state of constant expectation; that the house-bell never rang but that he was on the alert, looking over the banisters of the landing, or thrusting his head out of the dining-room door and listening eagerly; that he rarely left the house longer than an hour at a time, either walking in the grounds or taking short excursions in the country in a direction away from Copsford, and always re-entering with a face of grave expectation; and inquiring of whomsoever he met if any one had called while he was out.

That he did not occupy himself with any

pursuit such, I might suppose, as had beguiled the time for him when he formerly lived at Gardenhurst, I am sure. I have sometimes seen him endeavouring to fasten his attention on a book, close it abruptly, and either sink into thought or start up and restlessly pace the room.

He was singularly courteous to me—courteous indeed to all with whom he came in contact—but he rarely addressed me without bringing the conversation round to the one subject that absorbed his mind; and repeatedly asked me if I knew what they were still saying at Copsford about his daughter. But I never knew, for the reason I have given. Nor indeed was it requisite that I should, so far as his curiosity was concerned; for either through some hired agency, or by his own quick powers of observation, he appeared as thoroughly posted in current Copsford gossip as if he were visiting at houses all day long.

Meanwhile the emphatic advice which he had given to his daughter to hold her peace, and control her temper, had been acted on by her with a result which rendered her another woman. Her father's conduct, his profound anxiety, his feverish restlessness, and the physical change in him that had been

wrought by his troubles, had impressed upon her the gravity of her situation as no words could have done. Then, again, her pride had been roused and wounded by his reproaches and angry injunctions, and she was plainly determined to give him no further reason to reprimand her for the passionate expression of her feelings. She became silent, cold, impassive. Her beauty had a wasted air ; but one might easily see by her eyes that the spirit in her was controlled, not quenched ; that there was a fever in her heart, though her tongue was still ; that memory, bitter at all times, was the more poignant now that it was prohibited the relief of expression.

Her manner to me was kind, but without the cordiality that used to make it grateful. She had no longer any confidences to impart. The load of responsibility had been taken from her by her father ; her silence disdained sympathy. She was indeed a changed woman, but—with the stinging sense of shame in her, with bitter remorse to haunt her, with her haughty dissembled love for her father hourly fretted by the sight of his restless anxiety—more miserable than ever she had been whilst she lived with her husband.

One morning, about three weeks after the Colonel's return from London, Susan came into my room with her eyes red with tears. I asked her what was the matter.

"Why, Miss," she said, pulling a letter from her pocket, "I received this just now from father, and he says I mustn't stop here, but go home at once."

"How is that?" I exclaimed.

"He says," she answered, quite sobbing as she spoke, "that the stories which are told of this house make it not proper for me to remain here. He says he don't want to put his opinion in writing, for he knows his place, and other people's business is no affair of his; but a neighbour declares that if he had a daughter he wouldn't let her be servant in a house which has got a bad name, and he's quite of that opinion, and I must come home at once."

"We shall be very sorry to lose you," I said, thinking it best to make no further comment; but not a little startled by this very strong illustration of the tenacity and malignancy of the gossip that was afloat.

"It goes very much against me," she cried, "to leave like this. I don't believe a word of the wicked stories that are told. Mrs.

Ransome has always treated me well, and it's a pleasure to serve under you ; and I know mistress will think me ungrateful and bad-hearted for going away. Yet I daren't disobey father."

"I am sure Mrs. Ransome would not wish you to do so," I answered.

"But what excuse am I to make for going ? I mustn't give her the true reason ; and unless I tell a falsehood, which I don't want to do, she'll think me heartless."

"If you like," I said, "I will explain the matter to Mrs. Ransome."

The truth was an ugly one to tell ; but it seemed to me proper that it should be told, both for the girl's sake and for the Colonel's, who, by this instance, would obtain a new view of the extent and mischief of the current reports.

She thanked me, and begged me to add that she would never have left of her own accord. I asked if the letter contained anything she did not wish me to see ? No. She handed it to me, and I found its contents exactly as she had represented them, tolerably well-worded, and very emphatic.

I told her I would return it when I had seen Mrs. Ransome, and went upstairs.

The Colonel and his daughter were together in the dining-room. They had just finished breakfast, and were still at the table when I entered.

"I hardly know, sir," I began, "how to discharge my errand; but I am sure my duty is not to conceal anything from you."

He looked at me inquiringly. Mrs. Ransome clasped her hands firmly on the table. I drew out the letter; the Colonel read it, looked at the address on the envelope, and understood the whole thing at once.

His face was a shade paler, and his voice slightly trembled, as he said—

"Who is the girl's father?"

"He keeps a little shop," I answered, "at the top of High Street, I believe, sir."

Mrs. Ransome looked at the letter, but did not ask to read it.

"Susan," I continued, "came to me in tears, and told me of her father's wish. She has no desire to go, but she does not like to disobey her father, and so I offered to explain the matter to you and Mrs. Ransome. I thought it best that you should know the truth: moreover, it is but justice to an ex-

cellent girl that the real cause of her leaving should be explained."

"Phoebe, this concerns your maid—read it," he said.

She ran her eyes over the letter, I saw them sparkle. She looked at me, seemed about to speak, bit her lip, and flung the letter down.

The Colonel left his chair and paced about the room.

"Does he carry any weight with him, this little tradesman?" he exclaimed, pointing to the letter.

"I should imagine not. I never saw his shop, and I don't know what he sells. But I gather, from what Susan has told me, that he is in what is called a small way."

"He is not mixed up with any religious sect here, I mean? He doesn't preach and preside over meetings and that sort of thing?"

"I do not know, sir."

He read the letter again, frowned, thrust it into the envelope, and handed it to me.

"How little it needs to prejudice men's minds!" he exclaimed. "All the memories that cluster about this house cannot save it



from a petty tradesman's suspicions. The home of a family who for generations have borne the character of, and been honoured as, harmless upright people, innocent in their pleasures, generous in charity, manly and honest in their dealings with their fellow-men, has ceased to be a fit place for a servant, forsooth, to live in!"

"Since she is to go, let her go at once," said Mrs. Ransome. "She ought not to be allowed to stop five minutes in the house."

"She is not to blame, madam. The poor creature is crying at the thoughts of leaving you," I replied.

"Did you not hear Miss Ivory say that before, Phœbe?" cried the Colonel. "The girl sheds tears to leave you, and you would thrust her from the house for her attachment."

"Oh, papa, a letter like that makes me hate the whole world," she rejoined, pushing her chair away from the table. And then she sprang up and hurried out of the room.

"She *is* to be pitied," said the Colonel, looking at me deprecatingly. "That letter is a cruel stab."

"The girl will go home and tell the truth," I answered. "A few emissaries like her, to give the lie direct to the reckless chattering that is going on would do good."

"I suppose time will right us," he exclaimed. "But this ordeal grows so trying that I sometimes doubt if I shall be able to go through it. I would leave Gardenhurst tomorrow and sell the estate, and wash my hands of this unjust scandalizing neighbourhood, did I not fear that our departure would be interpreted as a tacit confession of my daughter's guilt. *How* can people suffer themselves to be prejudiced by reports which have not a grain of evidence to substantiate them! And yet I know that the prejudice is great. Mr. Skerlock keeps me *au courant* of public opinion, and though he tries his best to soften the news he gives me, he has to own that every day which increases the time of Mr. Ransome's absence deepens the curiosity and darkens the suspicions with which people regale each other."

"One would almost think, sir, that you must have enemies at Copsford. Otherwise,

how comes this affair, which is really nobody's business but yours and Mrs. Ransome's, to take so prominent a place in people's thoughts and conversation? In London, the subject would be forgotten in a day, unless the newsmongers kept it alive. I would give it a month, at the very outside, to live in a lazy place like Copsford; but I could not imagine it would occupy people's attention longer, unless there were enemies who made it their occupation to keep it perpetually on the *tapis*."

"We *have* enemies—and I know who they are, too—a family with whom Mrs. Ransome was on friendly terms before her marriage. There are three girls, or rather women, highly religious, regular attendants at church, who, I know for a fact, are incessantly talking about Mr. Ransome's disappearance, and compassionating the death of the broken-hearted mother. A single taper will light many lamps. A single tongue is enough to reillumine a subject as fast as it dies out. These people are the Sneerwell, Backbite, and Crabwell of Copsford. Look at this."

He went to the sideboard, opened a

drawer, and took out a newspaper, and handed it to me with his finger pointing to a particular place in it. The passage was a letter addressed to the editor of the "Copsford Intelligencer," and was signed "Justitia." I forget how it ran, but it was to the effect that: In May, 18—, a man named Jacobson, living with his nephew, was reported missing. Search was made, and the nephew was as active in the search as the police, offering indeed a reward of five pounds (a large sum for a poor man) to anybody who should discover his uncle. The search came to nothing, and the matter passed out of the public mind, until it was revived by a whisper, originating anywhere, that the nephew had murdered his uncle. The poor man's house was broken open, but nothing crminating found. Nevertheless, a summons was issued against him, and he was brought before the magistrates, but discharged for want of evidence. Three years after the nephew received a letter from Jacobson, dated from Australia, accounting for his mysterious departure, and remitting a bank bill. By paralleling this case, "Justitia" went on to say, with a

recent local affair of great notoriety, it was manifest there were two laws—one for the rich, and one for the poor. Had the individual who figured in the recent local affair been a poor woman, was it to be doubted that she would have been haled before the magistrates, and examined on the striking circumstantial evidence which, if rumour was to be credited, was to be produced? In saying this, the writer wished it to be understood that he was not actuated by malice. The individual to whom he referred was personally unknown to him, and, as proof that he was unbiassed, he heartily wished her a speedy deliverance from the very curious dilemma in which she was involved.

“I am surprised that a newspaper should insert such a letter as that,” I exclaimed, restoring the sheet to the drawer from which the Colonel had taken it. “It is utterly uncalled for. It offers no suggestion. It is of no conceivable use.”

“Except to keep the public prejudice alive,” he answered; “and that is what the writer intends.”

“Do you know who the author is, sir?”

“Yes; the youngest of the three women

I have spoken of, who used to be friends of my daughter and pretend to be so still; for she tells me they called here after Mr. Ransome was missing to offer their sympathy and so forth. I heard the name of the writer from a man who is under a trifling obligation to me, and who is odd enough to like me for having obliged him. He had it from the editor of the paper, who is his crony—one Wilkinson—whom I think I could reach through the law of libel; but what good would that do?"

"It is the letter of a despicable coward, sir."

"I do not value it, for itself, at that," he cried, snapping his fingers. "Worse than has already been said nobody can say."

But his manner persuaded me that he did mind it; he was deeply wounded by it and bitterly distressed.

"All this gossip, all these stabbings in the dark, merely keep alive my anxiety to receive news from Johnson—I mean the fellow who is looking for Mr. Ransome. He has been three weeks at work now, and has not written a line. But this was understood. He said he would write either to

announce a discovery or to tell me that the adventure was a hopeless one. You may judge with what misgivings I await the postman's visits. But I *have* a hope—a hope I cannot extinguish—that Mr. Ransome will return. Would to God he would come soon and end this horrible suspense! You notice a change in Mrs. Ransome, do you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"She is reserved—at last! She has learnt to hold her tongue. You will do me a service, Miss Ivory, by avoiding, as much as you possibly can, all reference to the subject of her husband and the prejudice against her among the people. A discussion may undo the victory she is gaining over her temper and make her dangerous to her own cause again."

I promised to be on my guard, though there was little need to say so; for as I have already said, her manner had greatly changed towards me, and the few conversations we held together were very prosaic and almost entirely referred to the affairs of the house.

I returned to my room and there found Susan. The atmosphere was haunted by a faint, familiar perfume, which made me say—

"Has Mrs. Ransome been here?"

"Yes, Miss ; I have been waiting to tell you. She gave me this."

She pulled a ten-pound note from her pocket.

"She's too good," the poor girl whimpered. "She makes me feel a wretch for leaving her in her trouble. But father's so stern that if I didn't leave on my own accord, he'd come and fetch me. But thank God, I've told her that father's reason for taking me away was sinful and false, and I'll tell him so. Mrs. Ransome is a wronged woman, and if I had to go to prison for declaring her innocence, I'd go gladly."

I told her that her father would probably let her return when she had pointed out the injustice of his suspicions, and explained, as she well could, the cruel treatment her mistress had received from Mr. Ransome, and the mean, aggressive, malignant character of the old lady. I added that she could serve Mrs. Ransome by disproving the reports she might hear ; and I then bade her go to the Colonel and wish him good-by, believing that it would cheer the poor old gentleman to learn what a firm adherent his daughter



had in a girl who was infinitely better qualified than the shrewdest outsider to judge of the truth of the rumours that were circulated.

So terminated this little incident. It became my business to find another housemaid ; and I went to Copsford that day and left word of our want at several shops ; not without a misgiving, however, that if the prejudice against Mrs. Ransome were as strong as I might suppose it by the removal of Susan, we might have some difficulty in getting another servant. However, my fear proved groundless ; for next day three girls called, one of whom I selected chiefly on account of her belonging to the factory town that lay beyond the hills, and out of the small-talk that was agitating the Copsford mind.

#### IV.

The autumn passed, and the early month of winter came—November, laden with grey clouds and chill winds which stripped the trees of their few remaining leaves.

During all this time no change had occurred in the house. A shadow was upon

the two principal occupants of it which kept them silent and gloomy and melancholy.

Of the two, the Colonel seemed the greater sufferer. His anxiety was feverish at times. He had grown so thin that he resembled a sick man. He slept but little, for often I would hear him pacing his room at night; and he was usually down, of a morning, long before the servants had left their beds. More than four months had elapsed since Mr. Ransome had been found missing, and not the smallest clue had been obtained as yet of his whereabouts. Was he dead? The Colonel once asked me this question, and watched me with wild anxiety; as if my answer could prove anything. If he were dead, and proofs of his death could not be procured, Mrs. Ransome's name was virtually banned for life. Her father might remove her; he might exile himself with her; but the mystery would live always; suspicion would become conviction; and her name would be associated in people's minds with the commission of murder.

The Colonel owned now that he would cheerfully throw his grounds and house open

to the strictest search that could be instituted. He longed for any proof, negative or positive. The mystery possessed him so entirely that it generated dangerous delusions. The horrible suspicion that his daughter might be guilty again returned to him. I never knew what conversations he had with her; but by putting together the circumstance of her keeping her room a whole day, and his asking me in the morning, shortly after his daughter had left the dining-room, many strange questions about her, I came to the conclusion that the dreadful misgiving which, by his demeanour, had plainly agitated him for a week past, had finally mastered him, and that he had put her through an examination which could leave her in no doubt as to his thoughts.

For myself, the practical conjectures which I might have hazarded, had I been an eyewitness instead of an actor in these strange events, were disturbed and baffled and forced into over-reaching subtleties by the influences that surrounded me. I tried to strip the facts of all the adventitious garnishings they had been furnished with by gossip, by old Mrs. Ransome's accusations, and, in a special

degree, by the disappearance of Maddox, which had complicated the mystery at the very threshold of it. But I could not satisfy myself. Bewildering considerations were perpetually recurring. Where were these two men? How was it that no trace of either of them was to be obtained. The Inspector, we had heard, had done his best—that is to say, he had done nothing at all but advertised more capable men of the “want,” and they had been seeking Maddox for three months. Other difficulties which encumbered the mystery lay in our inability to assign a motive for Mr. Ransome’s prolonged absence; for the attitude his mother had adopted, which was genuine as regarded her belief in her son having been murdered, as more than one witness who sympathized with the Colonel and his daughter testified; and the impossibility of proving that Maddox and his master did not act in concert on that night of their disappearance. The public had evidently hoped to cut the knot by accepting old Mrs. Ransome’s statement. But that still left the enigma of the footman’s disappearance untouched.

I confess the whole matter was a great

puzzle to me. When I had got hold of a thought that seemed extremely likely, it was met by another thought, which proved it in the last degree impossible. And though I might try and bare the facts, extrinsic considerations were perpetually colouring them and draping them afresh.

But one morning towards the end of November came very exciting news.

I had risen rather later than usual, owing to a cold I had taken on the previous day, and it was nearly half-past eight before I left my room. On my way downstairs I had heard the Colonel and his daughter talking rapidly and excitedly, and was quite at a loss to conceive what could have taken him to Mrs. Ransome's bedroom at that early hour.

The morning was a miserable one. Not a gleam of sunshine, and a high piercing wind that splashed the rain, mingled with sleet and hail, against the windows. The grounds, through the glass blurred with wet, looked miserably forlorn; the trees bare, black, and unbending to the gale that swept through them with a noise as of thunder.

I shivered, and hastened to the comfortable fire in my room, and sat brooding over

it, sipping a cup of tea, depressed as a cold always depresses one.

In this way twenty minutes passed, and then the housemaid knocked at my door and said I was wanted. I had been very often wanted since I had been in that house, and very frequently on eventful occasions. I went upstairs, expecting I know not what news. Father and daughter were together, the Colonel in a great state of excitement—his eyes shining, his face red, walking hastily about the room. Mrs. Ransome was far more collected; quite white, hard in the face as a stone. She played with the food on her plate with a fork; the Colonel's breakfast was untouched; the coffee smoked in the cup, some ham was on a plate—he had helped himself and forgotten to eat.

He passed me hastily, shut the door, and retaining his hold of the handle, exclaimed—

“Mr. Ransome is alive; he has been discovered.”

“Is it possible!” I answered, imitating his tone, and speaking in a loud whisper.

“I have Johnson's letter in my pocket. He has been all this time hunting for him. He has found him at last! God be thanked!”

"This is welcome news, sir."

"Doubly welcome, because I had given up all hope. There's a clever dog, this Johnson!" he exclaimed, chuckling and rubbing his hands together. "What patience! what shrewdness! what slow, unerring sagacity he has displayed! Oh, Phœbe! he has saved you! What will the miscreants who have talked about you say now? We will have him here—we will make a show of Mr. Saville Ransome! We will oblige the scoundrel to show his face, and prove your innocence! and then——"

Mrs. Ransome lifted her stony face, scarcely the less beautiful for being passionless, and said—

"Then what?"

He looked at her and then at me, and answered—

"That is an after consideration. We shall have to find out how mad he is, and act upon our discovery. Could I have my way I would flog him every day for a week, and then kick him into the wide world again. He is a vagabond by nature—I would keep him one!"

"Papa," she said, "I have told you once,

I repeat now, and Miss Ivory shall bear me witness, no earthly power shall ever induce me to live for an hour under the same roof with him, to look at him, to utter one word to him. He is no longer my husband. I renounce him before you both ; and may God punish me if by any compulsion, or through any impulse, I swerve for an instant from my resolution."

The flush in her cheeks faded quickly out, she pushed her plate from her, clasped her hands, and looked fixedly downwards.

"I would rather see you dead at my feet," he replied, "than have you own him as your husband. Have no fear ; your separation dates from the day of his disappearance ; and never, whilst I live, should I suffer you to be reunited. But you will see him, and pronounce him to be the villain who has heaped this horrible scandal upon you. That declaration will be your acquittal. Then we will leave this place, accurst to me by that man, for ever. Do you follow me? Make no foolish vows—suffer no temper to possess you. Your opposition may ruin us on the very threshold of our escape from this terrible



dilemma. Miss Ivory, you are of my opinion? Mrs. Ransome must not act for herself. She must do as I wish. Is it not so?"

"I am sure Mrs. Ransome will not oppose you, sir," I answered.

He drew a letter from his pocket, and, without opening it, said—

"Johnson writes that Mr. Ransome is in lodgings just out of Oxford Street, London. He knows he is the man he wants by the portrait he has of him, by the written description he had from me, by the fact of his having been in that lodging four months. This is good evidence; but more follows. The landlady of the house has been pumped, and her information is to this effect: that her lodger came from the country; that his habits are eccentric—for instance, he keeps within doors all day, and steals forth mysteriously at night; that he has given strict orders to be denied to any caller. He has obviously no pursuit; the landlady is utterly ignorant of the place he comes from; of his former occupation (if he had any); and of his right name—for she has strong reasons for suspecting the name that

he goes under—namely, Cleveland—to be false.

“If he is not Mr. Ransome, he ought to be!” I exclaimed. “The description fits him well.”

“Yes,” he cried, triumphantly; “and bear in mind that these are only characteristics, which Johnson describes. His face, he says, is that of the man whose portrait he has. By this time to-morrow I shall know certainly. I am to see him to-night.”

He looked at the clock and then hastily seated himself and fell to his breakfast, forcing himself to eat and drink.

“Do you mean that he should return with you, sir?”

“Certainly,” he answered. “He must come to this house. He must be seen and addressed by several persons—then let him go! my end will have been served.”

“But if he should refuse to accompany you?”

Mrs. Ransome looked up at this question.

“I shall find a means of compelling him,” answered the Colonel. But all the same he gazed doubtfully at me, for this considera-

tion evidently had not occurred to him before.

"Johnson would advise you on this matter, sir, and show you how it is to be managed," I said.

"I see two ways of dealing with him. He could be apprehended as a madman at once; or I could threaten him with the madhouse in case of his refusal to accompany me. To judge by your own experience, Miss Ivory, and by mine too for the matter of that, he is to be easily influenced by that threat."

"Why must he be brought here?" demanded Mrs. Ransome.

"To prove his mother a liar!" answered the Colonel, passionately. "How shall he bear witness to your innocence if he is not seen by those who believe in your guilt?"

"But if he is proved to be living, no matter by whom, will not that suffice?" she asked.

"It is far better," I put in, "that he should be recognised by those who profess to know that he is dead. Out of Copsford people are ignorant of this affair; and it would be a mistake to spread the story of it by bringing in outsiders to give their

evidence, who, perhaps, would not convince the people here after all, since it might be reported that these witnesses were paid by you to give false evidence."

"Quite so," exclaimed the Colonel. "And remember that our actions need have no reference to any one but the liars and scandal-mongers of Copsford. You have not to prove your innocence to the law or to the world, but to a handful of despicable gossips who are to be convinced only by their eyes." He added, emphatically, "I wish you would see things in their proper light, Phœbe."

"I hate him so," she muttered, "that I abhor the thoughts of having to confront him."

The Colonel left the table.

"Miss Ivory, will you kindly fetch my travelling bag?"

"Shall I send for a fly, sir?"

"No, I will walk. I must post to L—— and catch the up coach which reaches London at six."

I went to get his bag, and when I returned he was standing in the hall, and Mrs. Ransome was speaking to him from the dining-room door. She kissed her hand and with-

drew. He took the bag from me and opened the hall-door. There was a drizzling rain, and the high wind made it penetrating. I again begged permission to send for a fly, but he said he could not wait; his overcoat was a thick one and would protect him. He lingered a moment, and added—

“There is a great change in my daughter's character. I thought this news would have put her in high spirits. But do you notice how cold and impassive she is? One might think that the discovery of this man involved anybody's reputation but hers.”

“She has disciplined herself according to your wishes, sir. Depend upon it, she is not the less sensible of this great good fortune because she bears it with composure.”

“Perhaps so,” he answered, hurriedly. “Good-by, Miss Ivory.”

He turned up his coat collar and went into the rain. I was glad to shut the door, for the wind chilled me to the bones, and was perhaps responsible for the quite unnecessary depression that hung about me. Hearty iron winter with its vast stretches of snow, and the glorious sunlight scintillating on the ice-coated trees, I love; but this

dreary November, this month of sopping rains and earthy smells and cold, unwholesome damp, is a depression and a curse.

The dining-room door was open, and I saw Mrs. Ransome bending over the fire, which roared in flames up the chimney. She saw me as I passed and called to me.

"Papa will have a cheerless journey," she exclaimed. "What do you think of the letter he received? Do you believe the man has found Mr. Ransome?"

"The description tallies, does it not?"

"I do not greatly value that part about his having been in the lodgings four months, and his stealing out at night and his name being assumed," she said, chafing her hands quite close to the flames. "I rest my hope on the face answering to the portrait and description. But even there I have doubts. If Mr. Ransome feared pursuit—I assume this as a theory, I don't say he does; he is a madman who defies conjecture—he would disguise himself. In that case the detective, or whatever he is, would not know him by the description."

"He could not change his face."

"He could shave off his moustache and

let his whiskers grow ; and then no stranger would be able to identify him with the portrait I gave papa ”

“ But it is evident,” I said, “ that he hasn’t disguised himself. Besides, we must have confidence in the experience of the man Colonel Kilmain has employed. He would hardly write before he was convinced that the man was Mr. Ransome.”

She was silent. The bright flames flashed in her eyes and so coloured her face as to make her complexion brilliant. The attitude she was in finely exhibited the great beauties of her figure. Her rings glittered upon her fingers, and her thick hair looked like ebony in contrast with the ruby glare of the fire.

“ Do *you* not think,” I asked, “ that the man of whom the detective writes is your husband ? ”

“ Do not speak of Mr. Ransome as my husband, Miss Ivory,” she answered, quickly. “ You heard what I said just now before papa. He is less to me than the smallest fragment of those ashes there. I abhor the sound of his name. Not the least curse that this wretch has visited on me is my being

obliged by the force of circumstances to think and speak of him constantly. When you name him, call him what you please—anything but my husband.”

She spoke with great emphasis, but without passion. The experience she was living through was so far beneficial to her that it had taught her to subdue her temper. Time was when the remonstrance she had just spoken would have been delivered with flashing eyes and a face of anger.

She continued in a moment or two—

“ You asked me if I think this man whom papa has gone to see is Mr. Ransome. I answer, no.”

I looked at her with surprise.

“ I told papa my opinion when he read me the letter. The impression is instinctive—what else?” She glanced at me.

“ And of course he was angry, because his heart is in this discovery ; our reputation, our honour, and my future involved in it ; and he believes the man is found. I do not. I believe the man is dead.”

She ceased, looking intently at the fire. Finding me silent she fixed her eyes on me with a curious smile, and said—



"Why don't you ask me why I think he is dead? Are you ever troubled by the same suspicion of me that haunts papa? A suspicion that turned me into stone when I first understood it, but to which I have accustomed myself; because I reason that if one can doubt me, why not all? My own father—and you, who, were you a relative, could not know me more intimately than you do?"

The scornful smile again played over her mouth.

"Mrs. Ransome," I said, "why do you put such a question to me? I have told your father that I believe in your innocence as I believe in my own. I should be mad indeed if I doubted you."

"Why?" she asked, very quietly. "Take the trouble to recal what you know. Then assume my guilt and see if you cannot establish it. Shall I help you?"

I made no reply.

"On the night of Mr. Ransome's disappearance," she continued, "you heard certain noises, did you not? The turning of the handle of a door—the sound of a footstep on the landing—is it not so? I told you that

I myself had heard Mr. Ransome enter his bedroom. Let us call the hour eleven. He was found missing, let us say, at eight o'clock next morning—not before. From eleven till eight is nine hours. In that long time a greater bungler than one who was impelled by a hate no words can express, would have finished the task completely—disturbed the room to suggest a robbery, and obliterated every sign that might lead to the discovery of murder.”

I stared at her with astonishment.

“You have thought of all this—confess, Miss Ivory?” she exclaimed, with a laugh, “and I’ll tell you something more that has troubled you—where I could have hidden the body. Oh!” she cried, clenching her small hand; “but for this pastime of thinking how I *could* have killed him, I should go mad over the horrible monotony of our one speculation—where is he!”

“Pray remember your father’s injunction,” I said, while she laughed again at my startled face; “consider the consequences if you should be overheard.”

“What would you have me talk about? May I not vary the theme for my diversion?

You are a very cautious body, I know—quite Scotch in your slow approaches to a thought. Suppose the suspicion that has occurred to my father should have occurred to you ?”

“ It never has.”

“ May I not be allowed to sport with it ?”

“ But the sport is full of danger,” I replied, scarcely knowing whether her trouble had not unhinged her mind.

“ Well then,” she replied, preserving her ironical tone and sarcastic smile, “ let us go back to what we were saying. I wanted to know why you did not ask me my reason for supposing Mr. Ransome dead ?”

“ Since you wish it, I will ask you now.”

“ How I could frighten you if I pleased ! If I were an actress now, to scowl and mutter and wave my hand and cry, ‘ No matter ! ’ and exhibit other alarming suspicions of guilt after the stereotyped fashion ! But I must descend to prose ; so forgive me for disappointing the uncomfortable fancies I have raised by saying that I think Mr. Ransome dead merely because he stops so long away.”

She threw her head back and laughed

hysterically. The note in her laughter made me understand her mental condition. It was now plain that the excitement with which the letter her father had received had filled her, had been rendered dangerous by suppression ; and the internal irritation to which its concealment had subjected her nerves, was now beginning to tell. My surprise left me ; but not to appear to change the subject too abruptly, I said—

“ We must hope that he is not dead.”

“ We must hope that he is. Why should such a man live ?” she exclaimed, with gathering excitement.

“ For yours and Colonel Kilmain’s sake,” I replied, “ it is essentially necessary that he should be discovered.”

“ Ay, and then let him die,” she cried out, with a loud peal of laughter.

A moment after she was in hysterics. I had locked the door, and was holding her down upon the sofa in less time than I could have counted twenty. I would not call for assistance lest, in her attack, she should repeat some of the wild things she had been saying. It was well I took the

precaution. For a time she was positively delirious, seemed to think her husband present, and tore at the sleeve of her dress, and held up her arm, and bade him look at his finger-marks, and then shrieked out that she would have his life. Her struggles were so great that she threw me down, but I was up again in a moment, sitting on her, and pinning her to the sofa with all my strength. Extraordinary fancies possessed her. At one moment she cried out that there was a hearse at the door, and then exhorted me to order the coffin out of the room. Did I not see it? Look, there it was on the table! Afterwards a skeleton menaced her from the window. She writhed, and screamed, and shuddered, beating the air with her tossing arms, and changing her screams into wild peals of laughter, which subsided after awhile into sobs, and then the fit gradually passed away.

Meanwhile, somebody outside had been hammering at the door with a persistency perfectly maddening. But not until Mrs. Ransome was exhausted did I choose to pay attention to the sound, and, suddenly

looking out, I found the cook and the housemaid ghastly pale, and evidently labouring under some horrible impression.

“ For God’s sake, what is it, Miss ? ” they cried.

I answered that Mrs. Ransome had been attacked with hysterics, and bade the housemaid get me some water and a glass. They saw into the room, and therefore knew that I spoke the truth. Off they ran, and one brought a glass and another a jug, which I took and shut the door in their faces.

Hysterics are not very alarming in our sex. The fit passed from Mrs. Ransome with her sobs, leaving her a little shaken, but not paler than she was before. I hung about her for a time, forcing what cheerful subjects I could think of upon her mind, stirring the fire so as to keep it merrily roaring, and doing my utmost to save her from a relapse.

She did not recur to what she had said before the fit took her. To speak the truth, I don’t believe she knew what she had said. When she looked out of the window and saw the drizzling rain and gleaming grounds, she spoke of her father’s journey ; but there

was no nearer reference than that, in her conversation, to the subject that had made her ill.

It was very fortunate for my peace of mind that she *had* fallen into hysterics. Had she remained cool I must certainly have taken her remarks seriously; and it is not at all improbable but that the suspicions which she pretended to think I possessed, would have been excited in me. Even as it was, her ironical, hysterical badinage had put thoughts into my head which would never have entered without any help. For instance; when I would recal her father's suspicion of her, I speculated on the evidence there might be against her to justify his misgivings, and never found any. But, thanks to her own mocking suggestions, I could understand now that it was possible to imagine her guilty without grossly violating probability. What were her own words? That there were nine hours from the time of Mr. Ransome's entering his bedroom to the time when it was discovered that he had not occupied his bed, in which to put an end to his life and remove all traces of the deed. I had never thought of that

before. I was sorry to have to think of it now. The coquetting with such a theory was a ghastly amusement. I could only be thankful, both for her own and her father's sake, that she had made *me* only the butt of her tragical humours.

END OF VOL. II.



